De figuris Veneris

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/53169529.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con
Categories:	F/M, M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Tetralogy - Thomas Harris
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom/Hannibal Lecter, Francis Dolarhyde/Will Graham
Characters:	Dr. Frederick Chilton, Freddy Lounds, Alana Bloom, Jack Crawford, Francis Dolarhyde, Bedelia Du Maurier, Beverly Katz, Original Male Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Will Graham Has Encephalitis, Protective Will Graham, Possessive Hannibal Lecter, Jealous Hannibal Lecter, Self-Esteem Issues, Betrayal, Self-Sacrifice, Enemies to Lovers, Slow Burn, Memory Palace, Obscure Greek Mythology, male!Freddie Lounds, ooc!Freddie Lounds, POV Alternating, Minor Character Death, Period-Typical Sexism, Period-Typical Homophobia, Implied/Referenced Sexual Assault, Non-Consensual Drug Use, Kidnapping, Abduction, Medical Procedures, Brainwashing, Conditioning, Emotional Manipulation, Dubious Consent, Sexual Violence, Rape/Non-con Elements, Oral Sex, Rough Oral Sex, Rimming, Anal Sex, Somnophilia, Hallucinations, Dark Will Graham
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2024-01-20 Completed: 2024-02-15 Words: 120,235 Chapters: 26/26

De figuris Veneris

by CedarWaxxwing

Summary

September, 1983. Will is a miserable graduate student studying forensic psychology. Unable to afford an apartment, he lives with his meddling thesis advisor (Chilton) and does housework instead of paying rent. As his sanity deteriorates, the Ripper, the Tooth Fairy, and his own dark history begin to blur. Meanwhile, Alana's new suitor, an overly friendly surgical resident, refuses to leave him alone…

1980s AU where dark!Will figures out that the Shrike copycat is the Chesapeake Ripper. Surgeon!Hannibal plans to kill him. All the serial killers are obsessed with Will. References to obscure Greek mythology abound.

Prodrome

"There are those of us who live in rooms of experience we can never enter."
-John Steinbeck

"In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora"
-Ov., Met., Book 1, Line 1-2

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Thursday, September 22nd, 1983

Will let his pen fall to his desk, head swimming. Five hours of marking essays had taken a bat to his head, so intense was his migraine. He shook the last tablet of Bufferin out of the bottle and swallowed it dry.

Squaring up the stack of papers, he noticed a red smudge on one of them. His desk chair squealed as he turned to hold it closer to the exposed bulb on the ceiling. Footsteps above sent the light flickering through a rain of dust, but there it was: the distinct double loop whorl of a fingerprint.

He sniffed it. Ketchup and old burger grease. The stink turned his stomach.

Disgusted, Will flipped through the half of the essays marked by the other Teacher's Assistant, Freddy Lounds. Besides the occasional streak of mustard, Lounds offered little feedback in the way of marginalia. Each grade was scrawled at random. He'd unceremoniously assigned Julie Pierce, top of her class, an F. This was their first assignment of the semester and Lounds was already slacking off.

The pounding at Will's temples intensified as he tossed the stack onto his writing table. He closed his eyes to moor himself from the orange buzz filling the basement, imagining the flock of students that would accost him with complaints at his next office hours.

A faint knock came from the top of the stairs. The cellar door creaked open.

"You're late." Chilton's penny loafers stepped into view, followed by his tweed suit and freshly shorn face. He quailed upon seeing Will. "That can't be what you're wearing?"

Apparently, a flannel wouldn't cut it for Professor Heimlich's retirement soiree.

"I don't have much else," Will admitted.

He presented his wardrobe, where, to Chilton's dismay, almost everything was either threadbare or frayed. Still, his thesis advisor managed to dig out a corduroy blazer and a pair of battered oxfords.

“You’d think that, not having to pay rent, you’d have enough money for a nice suit,” he groused as he shrugged Will into the coat. “Or at least a watch.”

Their odd living arrangement had begun one year prior. Will’s meager stipend didn’t cover a DC apartment as well as tuition. When his savings had dried up, Chilton had suggested Will move into his Roland Park villa in return for cooking and cleaning. The basement was unfinished, but it was spacious enough to store Will’s tackle and rods. And Will preferred to live at the outskirts of the city. The quiet garden suburb let him think and his favorite fishing hole was only a short truck ride away.

The only downside was Chilton.

Chilton unclasped the watch from his wrist and looped it over Will’s. It was ostentatiously expensive. One of those fancy diving watches that came with a certificate of authenticity, probably worth more than Will’s Chevy. The leather strap was embossed with a custom monogram: FC.

“There. Now you can keep track of time.”

Will was overcome with a wave of nausea. He tried to jerk his hand away, but the watch was already buckled. “That’s not necessary. Anyway, I’m not feeling great—”

“Jack Crawford will be there. I want you on your best behavior.” Chilton stepped back and tutted. “Keep the watch. And remind me to buy you a tie for next time.”

Chilton herded him to his cherry red Cadillac parked out front.

“This is a great opportunity for us. For you,” Chilton corrected himself as he slid into the driver’s seat. A cloud of his cologne filled the car. “Connection with the Behavioral Science Unit would be a dream come true. Not to mention the more case studies, the better for your thesis.”

“I’m not doing any more profiles. We talked about this—I switched to the assessment of time of death by insect activity.”

“That was before you discovered that there’s a copycat walking free.” Chilton drummed the steering wheel and whistled a few bars of *Maneater*. He was as puffed up and preening as a mother hen.

Pins and needles pricked at Will’s left hand. The watch strap branded his wrist with the ghost of Chilton’s body heat. He flexed his hand throughout the drive, tendons fighting against the leather.

The last heat wave of summer had broken, and a chill was settling in for the night. Red maples and oaks, planted at intervals by Olmstead himself, shed their leaves into the avenue’s drainage ditches. Will shivered as his undershirt became soaked with sweat. He should’ve brought his fleece. He considered telling Chilton that he had mononucleosis, gastroenteritis, tuberculosis, anything to worm his way out of this damn party.

Focus on not passing out tonight. Then you can sleep for the rest of the week. He slumped, cooling his brow on the passenger window.

A real estate sign had been nailed to the bitternut hickory in front of Heimlich's Tudor-style mansion. A tire swing hung from its lowest branch, long disused. Dusk set its golden leaves ablaze.

On the front stoop, Chilton turned Will to face him. Before he could think, he made the mistake of looking him directly in the eyes.

Chilton's gaze fumbled at his head like a freshman pulling at a panty girdle. *Grasping hunger. The drudgery of lecturing, explaining the basics of psychoanalysis to slack-jawed idiots. Twenty years in academia and this was the closest he'd come to truly groundbreaking scholarship. The Minnesota Shrike copycat was enough material to publish for years, earn a tenure track position even. He would receive Fellowships, quit his position at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, and move into a mansion like Heimlich's. Maybe Inelle would start taking his calls again, let him see their kid. Will just needed to schmooze up to Crawford and flash his freakish preternatural insight. That fluff-covered skull held his ticket to the big leagues as long as he could keep him on a tight enough leash.*

Chilton braced his shoulders and made encouraging noises that Will couldn't distinguish. He was ten feet down a well, ears ringing. He thrust his knuckles into his orbital sockets until phosphenes snapped in his vision like fireflies.

Before he could recover, the door opened, unleashing the cacophony inside. The living room was choked with chortling Professors from psychology departments across the state with a smattering of graduate students in tow. A record player crackled with jazz. There was crab and spinach dip in a bread bowl, a tuna casserole, and a plum torte plucked straight from *The New York Times*. Chilton foisted a glass of merlot into Will's care.

Jack Crawford was an imposing man. Even as he clapped Heimlich's arm and rumbled a final congratulations his austere face seemed to command him to fare well. As he turned to go, he nearly knocked into a simpering Chilton.

"Jack, how good to see you!"

"Chilton," Jack nodded and made for the door.

"Did you read the paper I sent you?" Chilton's voice rose in pitch. He fiddled with his cufflinks.

Crawford glanced around the room. "Yes. Some novel ideas."

"And did you check Hobbs's pillows for hair?"

The blood emptied out of Will's head. Dizzy, he braced himself against the liquor cabinet. "You sent him my profile on Hobbs?"

Chilton ignored him, wide eyes fixed on Crawford. “Here’s the author, my student, Will Graham. So was he really—*eating them?*”

Crawford examined Will with a knitted brow. Will squirmed like a rabbit caught in a snare. “Listen, I won’t discuss the details here, but you have an interesting perspective, Graham. I’ll give you a call sometime.”

Will studied the hem of Crawford’s pants and attempted to smile. “Nice meeting you, sir.”

Chilton was ecstatic for the rest of the evening. He made the rounds greeting his colleagues while Will hugged the wainscotting, downing several glasses of wine. When Chilton’s squawking became unbearable, he ducked into a quieter study, where he spotted Alana Bloom.

What a relief. Alana stood against a wall of bookcases, laughing into a flute of champagne. Lips delicately rouged and hair pinned into a halo, she smoothed her checkered skirt nervously. Will made no effort to resist her gravitational pull.

“Alana, thank God. I’m dying here.”

She lit up. “*Will*, it’s been so long. Meet Dr. Hannibal Lecter.”

Will hadn’t noticed her partner until then. Alana took the man’s arm as he turned to face Will. He was the image of taste in gray herringbone, a crimson Windsor knot nestled at his throat.

He’d thought Alana didn’t date.

“I’ve heard so much about you, Mr. Graham. All good things, of course.” Lecter extended his left hand for Will to shake, the right preoccupied with Alana.

His hand had six perfect fingers.

All traces of civility escaped Will. A drop of sweat betrayed him, stinging his brow. The six-fingered hand hovered in expectation as time twisted and stretched around them.

“Mid-ray duplication polydactyly? That’s incredibly rare.”

He meant to shake Lecter’s hand but ended up lifting it to examine the arrangement of metacarpals and tendons. The duplicated digit was perfectly hidden among the rest, easily overlooked if you weren’t paying attention. The fingers were elegant, the eminences of his hand well-developed. Callused fingertips. Neat fingernails. He either played the piano or used his hands in his profession. Perhaps both.

Then he realized it looked like he was about to kiss Lecter’s knuckles and dropped them as if scalded. Cringing, he wiped his palms on his pants.

Lecter leveled a cool gaze at Will, tabulating details with rapid shutter speed, the whir of computation almost audible.

Alana stepped in, ever his savior. “Hannibal is finishing up his residency at Johns Hopkins this semester. We met at a psychiatric conference over the summer.”

“You’re a psychiatrist?”

“I’m a surgeon, but psychiatry is a passion of mine, as you can see.”

Excluding Alana, Will disliked doctors, especially young ones. An untrustworthy lot. They were often smug and he suspected they were unpleasant at home.

Alana blushed. “Hannibal has me driving up to Baltimore almost every week. We should grab coffee sometime.”

“I stopped drinking coffee. Too jittery.”

At that moment, Will could see himself from their perspective perfectly: skittish, sullen, sweaty. Unfit for society. He understood a rat’s panic when it was discovered wriggling through the larder at night. The wine was trying to make its way back up his esophagus. Time to exit this conversation. He searched for an excuse. Chilton had the keys to the Cadillac. It was an hour walk back. Trapped.

“Dinner, then?”

Will almost choked on the lump in this throat. “I think I better go.”

Alana stepped closer. “Is something wrong?”

An unmistakable guffaw sounded in the other room. “That’s Lounds. I gotta talk to him for a sec.”

With a terse goodbye, Will accidentally pushed past Alana, jostling her. There was a splash of spilled champagne, but he didn’t turn back lest he somehow worsen the already unsalvageable exchange.

Lounds was explaining the difference between a running back and a fullback to a pretty girl perched at the edge of her seat. Will eyed them as he poured his third glass of wine. Lounds had made an effort with his appearance tonight, having slicked back his mullet and worn a beige Fair Isle sweater. The girl, however, was more interested in making her escape. She slipped away when Will approached.

“I finished marking Chilton’s essays today.”

“Huh. Is that so?” Lounds craned his neck to stare at the retreating girl, his crooked bottom teeth showing over his drooping lip.

“Did you find Pierce’s thoughts on sex bias and sex-role stereotyping interesting?”

Lounds’s attention drifted to him at the word “sex.” “The only thing interesting about Pierce is her ass. You have something to say, Graham, just say it.”

“You didn’t read the essays.”

“No, I didn’t.” Lounds pulled a pack of Marlboros from his breast pocket and lit one up. “What about it?”

“What are you going to do when Chilton finds out?”

“Chilton isn’t going to find out.”

Will knew he was stepping into a minefield but had to ask, “Why not?”

“Because you’re going to grade all the assignments for the rest of the semester. Otherwise, I’ll start talking about what happened last summer.”

Will barked out a laugh. “Who would you even tell?”

“I have pictures. Eyewitness accounts. An article ready to go. All I have to do is send them to my father and you’ll be on the front page of the National Tattler the next day.”

So that’s what Lounds had been up to this month.

“No one cares what that rag publishes.” Will failed to deliver the line with the necessary bravado, and it sounded weak even to him. He braced himself against the wave of screaming headlines that flashed before him in fifty point Franklin Gothic font: *BLUE BADGE OF DEATH: POLICE OFFICER DISCHARGED AFTER FISH MARKET MASSACRE. DEATH ANGEL WILL GRAHAM ACQUITTED AMIDST NOPD COUP*.

Lounds blew a cloud of smoke. “Maybe not, but I’ll make sure a copy lands in Bloom’s lap. You have the hots for her, right?”

Will finished his glass of wine and set it down a little harder than he meant to. “*Don’t* bring Alana into this.”

“No need to get worked up. Marking, teaching, you love all that stuff anyway. Trust me, you don’t want the Tattler to tear you a new one.” With a flick of ash, Lounds disappeared after the girl, no doubt planning to accost her with more football trivia.

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Before his encounter with Will Graham, Hannibal’s evening had been pleasant enough. He enjoyed strolling through his old mentor’s study, reminiscing on the evenings spent discussing thanatology and cognitive theory over Bollinger and canapes. And the company was excellent. This was his third meeting with Alana in as many weeks and their conversation had yet to run dry.

He helped her blot champagne off her blouse as Will fled the room.

“Did I say something?” Hannibal asked, willfully ignorant. Naked jealousy had consumed Will’s features from the moment Alana had taken his arm. He wouldn’t be surprised if the

two had dated in their undergrad days at the University of Chicago, but he'd broach that subject at a later date.

"Sorry, he's not usually that antisocial. I can't imagine why he came. He hates parties."

"Perhaps my hand disturbed him?" He flexed his digitus medii in tandem.

"Oh no! Will's not like that." She pushed his handkerchief away. "I'll take care of this in the washroom. Please don't let this ruin your night."

"Of course not."

Hannibal spied on Will under the pretense of refilling his drink. He was quarreling with a pink-faced man at least four stone heavier than himself. Lounds he presumed. About what, Hannibal couldn't hear over the record player.

Will was trembling, one corner of his mouth stained purple with wine. The tips of his curly hair were soaked with sweat and sticking to his forehead. What possessed the man to attend a party stinking of low-grade fever and cheap cologne?

Despite this, Will was undoubtedly handsome. With a bath and a proper shave, he'd have the countenance of the deified Antinous. He kept his gaze lowered as if demure, save to shoot the occasional glare at Lounds through the rims of his glasses. His expressive eyes might have been painted by Bouguereau. Hannibal lamented that beauty could house such discourtesy, though based on his Rolodex of business cards he couldn't be surprised.

When Will ran a hand across his forehead, his cuff slipped, giving Hannibal a look at his wrist. He wore dirty shoes and no tie but sported an Omega Seamaster—a luxury diving watch. Golden initials with baroque detailing flashed against the leather band: FC. A relative? Or someone more interesting? Perhaps Will Graham was a kept man.

The mystery was solved moments later when the cloying scent of juniper and oakmoss assaulted him. A man in his forties had come to pour himself more punch and emit billows of Drakkar Noir, the same cologne that clung to Will. Moreover, he kept sneaking looks at Will, who, having concluded his chat with Lounds, snuck out the front door.

"It's inspiring to see so many friends gather to celebrate the Professor's retirement." Hannibal extended his hand to the malodorous man, the right one this time. "Dr. Hannibal Lecter. I studied under Heimlich several years ago."

The man wasn't interested in making his acquaintance. Hardly looking at him, he introduced himself as, "Dr. Frederick Chilton. George Washington University."

Much later, when night had fallen and the party was at the height of revelry, Hannibal peered out the blinds of the picture window.

Will sat doubled over on the old tire swing, silhouetted by the streetlights. Chilton towered over him. He hung a scarf over Will's shuddering neck, combed fingers through his curls,

then pulled his head against his coat. He held Will there for a moment. Then, together, they stumbled down the garden path and turned down the street.

Scarlet Points of Light

Friday, September 23rd, 1983

Chilton vibrated with energy the next morning, humming some *Duran Duran* as he strode into the kitchen and clapped Will's shoulders. "What do we have here? Pancakes?"

"Just toast today, sir."

Will's grip tightened on the spatula as he flipped an egg, splattering oil out of the pan. He slid out from Chilton's grasp when the toaster popped.

A restless night's sleep hadn't improved Will's fever. The hangover didn't help either. His lymph nodes were sore, and he was cold even wearing his knit cap and hunting jacket.

Chilton hmmed in disappointment but sat at the counter and tucked a napkin in his collar.

"Last night went swimmingly! Though I didn't know you were that fond of wine. Now I know what to get you for your birthday. Hold on, where's your new watch?"

"Downstairs. Wouldn't want to get grease on it."

Will set down two plates of fried eggs and buttered toast. Chilton's daily triad of drinks followed: a glass of milk, a glass of orange juice, and a cup of coffee, all set down with a violent thunk.

Chilton looked at the drops of orange juice spilt on the counter. "I see you're angry with me."

"You didn't ask before sending my thesis to Crawford."

"You never said I couldn't! Not sending it would practically be an obstruction of justice. But if you dislike the FBI so much, just think of Jack as a potential collaborator."

"I won't have anything more to do with Hobbs or his copycat, no matter how badly you want another serial killer to play with at the BSHCI."

"You'll change your mind once Jack gets in contact."

"He might not. It's been over a year since the copycat made a move. Maybe he's done."

"That's not what you predicted in your profile."

Glaring, Will wolfed down his breakfast and went to scrub the pan.

"I've left a list of chores and grocery money in my office. My suit from last night needs dry cleaning and the house could use a dust and vacuum now that pollen season is over. And I'll be home for dinner at seven."

“Right.”

As Will stomped down the basement stairs, Chilton called after him, “Don’t let me catch you without your watch again! Heaven knows you need help keeping track of time.”

Morning found Will at the Enoch Pratt Free Library downtown. He meant to mark the essays Lounds had neglected but couldn’t bring himself to slog through another five hours of torment so soon after yesterday. Instead, he grabbed his old friend, the DSM-III, and settled in the periodicals room, alone except for one old man reading the Baltimore Sun.

Will jumped as a voice spoke behind him. “Hogan’s *Conceptual and Psychometric Analysis of Empathy*. Basch’s *Empathetic Understanding*. Conduct disorder in adolescence.”

Lecter studied Will’s reading material over his shoulder. He tossed a journal—*Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*—next to Will and sat down.

Last night’s embarrassment rose like bile in Will’s throat. After discussing the incident with Alana, Lecter had probably concluded that Will was a dolt at best, a douchebag at worst. Why he hadn’t fled the library instead of striking up this pointless conversation, Will couldn’t fathom. He must enjoy watching unsocialized outcasts make fools of themselves.

There was a freedom in speaking to someone who already thought the worst of you. Will gave in and dropped his social graces.

Looking down like a surly schoolboy, he demanded, “What are you doing here?”

“Keeping up with the literature, same as you.” Lecter flipped to an article about orbicularis muscle-ring continuity. He didn’t wear scrubs but smelled faintly of antiseptic. He must have come from his morning rounds at the hospital. “Let’s see. Empathy and mental disorders. Are you researching sociopathy for your thesis?”

Will bristled. How much had Alana told him?

“The term ‘sociopath’ hasn’t been used by any respectable psychologist since 1968.”

“Then this is for your personal curiosity?”

“Something like that.”

“Do you lack empathy?”

Will hesitated, but, hell, he was too tired to lie. “The opposite.”

“How do you know? Did you grade yourself with Hogan’s empathy scale?”

“As if I would subject myself to that. Have you seen the questions on that thing?”

“Yet you’re reading his latest publication.”

Will sighed. “I’ll read anything that’s remotely related to my condition. After years, I’ve yet to find a precedent or plausible mechanism. Makes me think psychology is a bunch of baloney.”

Lecter kindly didn’t point out that Will himself was a psychologist.

“What are your symptoms?”

“Irritability. Misanthropy.” Now he was being diagnosed. This had gone on long enough. “I thought you were a medical resident. Shouldn’t you be at a clinic somewhere?”

“Fridays are academic half days.” Lecter wiggled his journal to demonstrate his studiousness.

They read in silence for ten minutes. Will struggled to focus on his own studies, so preoccupied was he by Lecter’s mannerisms. He ended up staring at his six fingers. He wore bespoke leather gloves with an extra digit on the left hand. Having never looked above his shoulder, Will still had no idea what the man’s face looked like, but he was hyper aware of how they sat inches apart. Their body heat slowly occupied the air between them.

Lecter paged through his journal so quickly it was hard to believe he gleaned much from it unless he read at superhuman speed. When he reached the end he turned to Will once more.

“I have an extra ticket for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra tonight. I’d be delighted if you came. I’ll treat you to dinner afterwards.”

“Alana put you up to this.”

“She thinks we’d make good friends.”

“She wants you to keep an eye on me,” Will corrected, snapping the DSM shut. He wouldn’t tolerate pity from this man. With his headache, he couldn’t tolerate loud classical music either. “How about we lie and say we did? Tell her that I’m fine so she stops worrying.”

“Does she have reason to worry?”

Will pinched his brow. “You’re not going to make this easy, huh?”

“You wouldn’t have me attend the symphony alone, would you?”

“Bullshit.” He’d never dealt with someone so glib. “Fine, you win.”

Lecter preened. “Excellent. I’ll pick you up at seven thirty. May I have your address?”

Will had trouble concentrating for the rest of the day. His head pounded. He shivered despite his many layers of clothes. When he glanced at the clock, it seemed to have skipped forward several hours. He hastily shelved his books and dashed back to the parking lot. At Roland Park, he baked two frozen pot pies in the oven. At seven fifteen, Will threw them down on the dining room table.

Chilton looked at his pot pie in dismay. “I remember the days when you would make stone crab, chicken francese, *meatloaf*. Dinner would be hot on the table at seven o’clock sharp every night. What happened?”

“Just busy these days.” Will broke open the crust to let the steam out. Peas and cubes of beef swam in the congealed gravy. He was too queasy to eat, especially when he thought of his dinner with Lecter later that night.

Will envisioned Lecter ringing the doorbell while he and Chilton picked at their pot pies, and the insufferable questions Chilton would ask about his new “friend.” Besides Lecter himself, that was possibly the last thing Will wanted to deal with right now.

He pushed his pie toward Chilton. “I’m not hungry. You can have mine if you want.”

Chilton was too astonished to comment before Will hurried out.

He waited on the sidewalk huddled in three layers of coats. Using the waning light and the trunk of an oak to conceal himself from the house, he tried not to feel like a criminal.

Will was floored when a sleek Bentley Mulsanne Turbo rolled up to the curb. He’d never seen one in person, much less sat in one. What kind of medical student drove a turbocharged luxury car?

“How did you afford this?” Will asked, running his hands over the walnut panels of the dashboard. The engine purred against his fingertips. It took a moment for him to notice that Lecter wore a tuxedo. “Oh, God. Where are you taking me?”

“The new symphony hall on Cathedral Street. The BSO is launching their latest concert season.” Lecter studied Will’s layers. “Formal attire is encouraged but not required. Are you wearing a suit jacket under all that fleece?”

“In a sense.”

“Is it the corduroy from last night, by any chance?”

“Maybe. Yes.”

Lecter considered for a moment, then pulled into the street. “Very well. Are you familiar with Brahms? Schoenberg’s arrangement of his Quartet in G?”

“I’m more of a Willie Nelson kind of guy. I take it you’re a fan?”

“I’m a fan of good music performed by talented musicians. The BSO never disappoints.”

Though formal attire wasn’t required, most people were wearing evening gowns or three-piece suits. Will had never seen this much finery up close. In his younger days he might’ve felt like a duck out of water, but he was more amused than anything now. No one’s opinion here mattered to him.

Several people came up to greet Lecter as they entered. Will paid half attention to their introductions, not expecting to ever meet any of them again. He didn't speak and wasn't acknowledged, besides a few critical once-overs of his attire, and that was fine. Ideal, really. He focused on shivering, freezing without his layers or cap. If Lecter was embarrassed to be seen with him, he didn't show it.

Five minutes into the performance, Lecter started to cringe intermittently. The change was subtle, but displeasure radiated off him. Perhaps he'd noticed Will covering one ear in an effort to pacify his migraine. Or perhaps Will's blazer, soaked with sweat the night before, emitted an unpleasant odor. Will lifted his sleeve and sniffed, but it didn't tell him much.

The concert hall emptied into the lobby during intermission.

"Could I treat you to any refreshments? Wine, perhaps?" Lecter offered.

Alcohol would dull his senses, but it would also exacerbate his headache.

"I'll just find a water fountain."

Will joined the throng headed toward the bar. A dim alcove in the lobby beckoned to him. He nestled against the brick wall and inhaled expensive cigar wafting from a nearby group. It made him want a smoke, a habit he'd picked up from his partner during his time as a cop. The craving flared up whenever he was stressed. The tobacco smell was an anchor now.

He was sorely tempted to leave. There was a bus stop on the corner that would take him back to Roland Park in fifteen minutes flat. But he stayed, if only to ensure that Lecter would regret this evening.

When Will returned, a high society lady occupied his seat. She was close to Lecter in age, in her mid-thirties at least, hair smoothed back into a French twist. She bent her head close to Lecter's to whisper, lips inches from his ear, movements uncoordinated. Lecter steadied her as she briefly struggled to sit upright.

Of course Alana wasn't the only woman after him. He must have plenty of experience in that field. Images of Lecter in various states of intimacy flashed in Will's mind's eye, unbidden. To his dismay, he couldn't imagine him as anything less than an expert in the bedroom.

"Bedelia, may I present Mr. Will Graham. Will, this is Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier, my supervisor at Johns Hopkins."

Du Maurier turned to Will with a beatific smile. "A pleasure to meet you."

Will didn't know where to look. He ended up focusing on her chin. "And you."

She lifted a languid hand for Will to help her stand. Midway up, she stumbled into his chest and braced herself there.

Will instinctively grasped the cool skin of her shoulder to prevent her from toppling over. Was there any appropriate place to support a woman wearing a sleeveless dress? He glanced

nervously at Lecter, who he expected would collect her, but he remained seated, unruffled, observing them. Was that appraisal or—*interest?*

“Let me help you back to your seat,” Will offered.

“You’re darling, but I’ll be fine on my own. I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

As she drifted away, Will stared after her in concern. He had half a mind to follow her, just in case.

After the performance, Lecter helped Will don his many coats. It was unnerving to have his back turned to him for so long. He could feel himself being studied from behind.

“I get it, okay? You’re smarter, wealthier, and more cultured. My social better in every way. When it comes to Alana I was never even in the running. I wish you two the best of luck, truly, so let’s call it a night and pretend this never happened.”

“Alana and I are not dating.” Lecter was *amused*.

“Sure, whatever, just leave me out of it.”

“I was hoping to get to know you further.”

“Well I was hoping we’d never cross paths again.”

A pause. “That seems unlikely if you’re to remain Alana’s friend,” Hannibal said lightly.

There wasn’t much Will could say to that.

Lecter lived in a townhouse in Fell’s Point close enough to the harbor to smell seawater. The Bentley drove smoothly over the cobblestone and into a two-car garage. Will made a point not to wipe his shoes in the foyer before following Lecter up to the main floor.

The night’s entree would be “rognon de veau à la Bercy” Lecter informed him as he handed him a knife. Lecter took off his jacket and loosened his collar to saute kidneys in butter and fish stock. Having never tried kidneys, Will watched them simmer in trepidation. He rolled up his sleeves when Lecter requested he mince the mushrooms.

The mechanical whir of Lecter’s scrutiny clicked up a notch. “May I ask where you acquired such a distinctive watchband?”

What was another embarrassment to add to the list? Might as well admit it. “My thesis advisor says I have a time-keeping issue. I think this watch is meant to be a punishment.”

“Surely you don’t have to wear it all the time?”

“I live in his house, so we see each other pretty much every day.”

“You must be close.”

Will caught the implication. His face flushed as he hid behind the rims of his glasses. Of course he was aware of homosexuality. His brief stint as a police officer in New Orleans had shown him plenty. Public trysts were de rigueur in the French Quarter and under the wharf. Guys joked around, sure, but he'd never been seriously accused of it himself.

"Not in particular, no. Just saving rent by doing his chores. I sleep in the basement, use the side entrance, avoid him when I can." Like a servant, Will knew Lecter was thinking. "But we share meals."

"I imagine living with your advisor and landlord can be uncomfortable."

"Yeah, no kidding. Pissing him off would compromise both my degree and my housing." Mincing complete, Will let the knife clatter to the counter. "What about you? A med student with a Bentley and a four-floor townhouse?"

"My family was wealthy. Medicine is more of a pastime than a livelihood."

Lecter retrieved a carafe of wine and offered it to Will.

"I shouldn't."

Lecter tilted his head as if concerned. "Not even a 1982 Lafite Rothschild? It's been decanting for six hours."

"Like I know what that means."

"All the more reason to try it." Lecter poured two generous glasses and set to chopping shallots.

The finished dish was elegantly plated with duxelles de champignon and garnished with a sprig of watercress. It was almost humiliating to eat it while wearing his fleece and knit cap, but Will took a bite. An earthy, almost bitter tang burst as the kidney split on his teeth. Underneath the caramelized surface was tender, iron-rich flesh. It was the best food Will had tasted all year.

The shock made Will forget his condition. Without thinking, he pushed up his glasses and looked at Lecter's countenance. It was filled with strong lines and contrast, like the woodcut prints sometimes used on the cover of textbooks. His maroon eyes reflected the chandelier as a hundred scarlet points of light. They met Will's gaze with calculated composure.

Prolonged eye contact was usually enough to overwhelm Will's sense of self, but this was like slipping into a warm bath. He felt drunk. His muscles relaxed. Lecter's thoughts moved behind the curtain of his face, unreadable, but one thing became clear: whatever Lecter's motive for tonight was, it wasn't the pissing contest Will had assumed. Nor was it Alana's bidding.

The morsel sat heavy on Will's tongue. When he swallowed Hannibal's gaze followed the movement of his throat.

"It's delicious," was an understatement, but Will didn't know what else to say.

Hannibal smiled.

Conversation became less painful after that. He found himself asking about Hannibal's disapproval during certain sections of the performance (an amateur in the woodwinds had been off-key). They discussed the painting of Leda and the Swan above the fireplace. Hannibal was interested in Will's experience in criminal psychology and forensic pathology, and he even held his own on the subjects, being well-read on them himself. To Will's surprise, they discovered a shared disdain for current practices in criminal profiling—lazy, inductive assessments that drew conclusions based on similar previous cases rather than treating each one as unique. Before long Will had gone through two glasses of wine and Hannibal was standing to prepare dessert.

Will pushed back his chair. "I won't impose further."

Hannibal caught him by the shoulders and pressed him back into his seat. "I insist you try the galette. It'll pair well with the last of your drink."

The ginger and pear pastry melted in Will's mouth. His muscles were loose. His head was nodding before he realized how drowsy he was.

"Sorry, I didn't sleep well last night."

Hannibal rose to help him to his feet. "Let me drive you home."

"It's fine. I'll catch the 11. Should be one in ten minutes." His speech was slurring. He really should've laid off the wine.

"It's no trouble at all."

Will didn't resist being whisked back into Hannibal's car. He pressed his cheek against the dashboard and inhaled deeply to smell the leather. Streetlamps lit the dilapidated warehouses and gentrified apartments of Fell's Point as they slid past the passenger window. The last thing he recalled from that night was the horn of a tugboat sounding in the distance.

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The windows of Will's house were dark when Hannibal parked in the rear laneway.

Will was unconscious, head lolling onto his shoulder and cap falling off. Hannibal plucked it away and smoothed his hair into something presentable, feeling heat radiate off his forehead. It was satisfying to see Will's face open, vulnerable for a change.

Hannibal searched Will's pockets for his wallet and keys then dead-lifted him into a bridal carry. Passing a collection of garbage bins, he tramped through a woody copse to the backyard, where he managed to unlock the basement door silently with one hand, Will propped against his side.

The door opened to a cold concrete box, not at all what Hannibal had imagined. It reeked of sickness. There was exposed insulation. A thick film of dust clung to every surface. Most of

the basement was occupied by cardboard boxes of Chilton's personal effects. A twin-size cot, a wardrobe, and a small writing table were assembled in one corner almost as an afterthought.

He laid Will down on the cot. The mattress was so thin it sagged under his weight. He fluffed the pillow under Will's head, then eased off his glasses. His eyes appeared larger without the rims obscuring them.

Hannibal sat at the desk and stared at him, weighing his living aesthetic value against his potential in death. He was beautiful, yes, and quite the conversationalist once wine loosened his tongue. He wasn't a misanthrope, whatever he claimed. He was highly self-aware and attuned to the needs of others, yet navigated a crowd as if he were a contagion in need of containment. Half of his reluctance that evening stemmed from his belief that Hannibal found his company onerous. His rudeness, however ugly, was intentional. A prickly armor that kept the world at arm's length, while his more courteous instincts leaked through the cracks. Anyone who climbed his walls would be treated to a rare kind of friendship. Hannibal understood why Alana kept in contact with him.

But, besides her, he had no family or friends. He spent hours alone in libraries and forests without informing anyone of his whereabouts. Chilton might notice if he disappeared, but a typed note could assuage his suspicions for days.

It had been months since the Chesapeake Ripper had bared his teeth.

Minutes passed, but Will didn't stir.

"Will, are you alright?"

No answer.

Hannibal pried open one of his eyes. His pupils were blown out, staring into nothing. His heartbeat was slow and even.

To business then.

First, Hannibal pressed the basement key into a block of putty. He would make a copy later. Then he rifled through the contents of Will's waste bin. Tissues, grocery receipts, empty bottles of Bufferin and Di-Gel. Toiletries were stored in a box on the floor. There was no prescription medication. No alcohol or cigarettes either, surprisingly. Hannibal supposed Will couldn't afford them.

The wardrobe was filled with jeans and flannel. A collection of white t-shirts and socks were neatly folded in a drawer. Here was a concentrated form of Will's scent from before he was sick. Clean sun-dried cotton. Very nice. Ummm. Hannibal allowed it to wash over him for some moments. It was preferable like this, unmuddied by Chilton's cologne.

In contrast to the tidy wardrobe and organized fishing equipment, the writing desk was chaos. There were books, a typewriter, and a makeshift fishing fly stand made from corks nailed to lumber. The September issue of *Field & Stream* was open to a solunar table of fish feeding times. Hannibal rummaged around, hoping to find a planner or address book. Instead, at the

bottom of a drawer, he found a thick folder tied shut with butcher's twine. A photocopied article peeked out: *Northern Algonkian Cannibalism and Windigo Psychosis*.

Hannibal ran a gloved thumb over the title and glanced at Will, who was still sound asleep. He had hours before he woke up, even if he'd misjudged the dosage of Rohypnol.

The folder contained a collection of articles about cannibalism from fields ranging from anthropology to English literature. Hannibal, who rarely indulged in academic perspectives on this topic lest he left a damning paper trail, now memorized each one. They covered Freud's "cannibalistic" stage of development, ontological insecurity, and Franklin's Lost Expedition of 1848. Pedestrian. Will had annotated only one article, *Laing, Lawrence, and the Maternal Cannibal*, underlining a single quote:

Like a thin white bird blown out of the northern seas,
… he drags and beats
Along the fence perpetually, seeking release
From me, from the bond of my love which creeps up, needing
His happiness, whilst he in displeasure retreats

I must look away from him, for my faded eyes
Like a cringing dog at his heels offend him now,
Like a toothless hound pursuing him with my will.

At the very back of the folder was a neatly typewritten manuscript entitled *Paternal Cannibalism by Proxy*. It contained conclusions drawn from three interviews Will had conducted with Garret Jacob Hobbs that summer. Will had written detailed descriptions of all eleven murders, including Hobbs's wife, daughter, and those whose bodies were never found. He wrote with such clarity one might think he had witnessed the events himself. Hannibal searched for the interview transcripts. Alas, they were probably locked in a filing cabinet at the BSHCI.

One victim, Cassie Boyle, was singled out. Unlike the FBI, Will was certain that Boyle had been killed by a copycat instead of Hobbs. Not only that, but he also theorized that the copycat was the Chesapeake Ripper, who hadn't surfaced in almost six years—not since Hannibal had begun his residency at Johns Hopkins. Unable to publish a photo of the tableau, Will provided a hand-drawn sketch and noted the attention to artistry absent in the other murders. He likened it to Michelangelo's Pietà.

As intoxicating as it was to read his own perspective of Boyle's transformation so masterfully chronicled in prose, Hannibal tried to remain objective. He'd been skeptical of Will's self-diagnosed empathy disorder, but no longer. The rational course of action was to dispatch Will quickly and quietly. A tableau was out of the question. It must look like an accident. Perhaps Will would disappear while hiking in the Monongahela National Forest over the weekend.

But what a waste that would be.

Hannibal placed a hand against Will's abdomen and palpated his stomach, feeling the kidney sitting there. Will's carotid artery pulsed in time with the tick of Chilton's watch. Hannibal

unclasped it from his wrist and shut it in a drawer—he found the smell of the watchband objectionable.

Will's lips parted and Hannibal stooped to smell his breath. It was still sweet and gingery from the galette. He smelled Will's hair to determine his brand of shampoo—the cheap kind that comes in the white long-necked bottle. He searched for a stretch of skin that was purely Will, opening his mouth to scent like a cat.

The scrape of Will's stubble on his incisor made Hannibal pull back with a start.

A new plan coalesced. Olympus had sent him its finest huntsman. He would steel his resolve, learn from the demigods of yore, and triumph where they had failed. If this was to be his heaven-sent trial, he would rise to the occasion.

He draped a quilt over Will before venturing back into the night.

The Golden Apple

Saturday, September 24th, 1983

That night Will dreamed of Cassie Boyle's corpse. Milk white, it floated in the air as it had hung from the rack of the beheaded stag. Black hands curled under her arms and thighs. Talons extended and curved upward, biting into her flesh, piercing through her chest. A beast, invisible against a dark void, carried her closer to Will, offering her for examination. Ink poured over her face, her limbs, and swallowed her up.

"Good morning."

Will jolted. He was standing in Chilton's kitchen pantry.

Chilton stood in the doorway, one hand on the light switch, the other holding a mug of freshly brewed coffee. He studied Will, who was still wearing his slacks and blazer from the night before. "You're dressed up for eight am on a Saturday."

Will's thoughts were sluggish. He picked up a box of Cracklin' Oat Bran. "Just grabbing some cereal."

Moths fluttered out of the open box. The coffee machine burbled in the kitchen.

"Uh huh. When was the last time you bathed?"

"I don't know."

Chilton crowded into the pantry, herded Will to the upstairs bathroom, and turned on the shower.

Will swayed. How had he gotten home last night?

"If you must go on a bender, at least keep yourself presentable. And please do a load of laundry when you get a chance."

Will registered his blazer slipping over his shoulders and dropping to the floor. His collar loosened as his shirt buttons came undone, one by one. Brisk hands unbuckled his belt and yanked down his pants and underwear at once. He braced himself on the sink and blinked rapidly.

The brush of fingers put Will on edge. Capillaries at the surface of his skin dilated. Pressure built in his skull. He tilted his head back, dizzy.

Chilton shoved him into the spray. "Scrub. With soap."

Will did as commanded. He tried to ignore the stiffness at his groin with little success. After lathering the rest of his body, he gave himself a few brusque strokes. He came quickly, staring at the drain and thinking of nothing at all.

He ignored Chilton's questioning look in his hurry to the basement and dozed in bed for the rest of the day, resisting the urge to touch himself again.

Sunday, September 25th, 1983

The next morning Chilton held their monthly book club over tea and scones, their "Sunday worship" as he liked to call it. Will and Lounds sat in Chilton's sunroom and listened to him wax lyrical about Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, a much celebrated text in the field of psychoanalysis. The first chapter covered *The Sexual Aberrations*, which Chilton considered requisite to violent crime.

Will, having read and dismissed the book as outdated in undergrad, struggled not to zone out.

Lounds tripped Chilton up when they reached the topic of "inversion."

"I don't see why Freud doesn't classify it as degeneracy. He even says that degenerate behavior 'severely impairs the capacity for efficient functioning and survival.' What else would you call this gay pneumonia going around?"

Chilton and Lounds argued over the designation of sexual aims and objects while Will bobbed the tea bag in his mug. The leaves rose and settled, rose and settled, obscured by the red theaflavins and thearubigins seeping into the liquid.

"What do you think, Will?" Chilton asked.

Will startled. The tick of Chilton's watch was a drumbeat at his wrist. Static filled his ears.

The phone rang in the living room. Chilton, relieved to exit the conversation, excused himself. Will regarded Lounds over the rims of his glasses. Lounds sniffed and reached for another scone. They stared at each other in silence.

Chilton practically skipped back into the room. "That was Crawford. He wants us to meet him at a homicide crime scene."

Lounds perked up like a hog catching the scent of a truffle. "Can I come?"

"I'm not going." Will stood. Had he made it to his truck he would've spent the rest of the day fishing in the Loch Raven Reservoir, but Chilton blocked the door.

"I'd hate to do it, but if you turn down this opportunity, I'll be forced to bring it up to the department. Your annual review is coming up and you're expected to exhibit some professional development."

Will worked his jaw. He considered quitting right then. After New Orleans, he'd started this program to earn a desk position, maybe teach somewhere. What was the point if he was thrust back into the field after all?

But he needed somewhere to sleep, if only for a few weeks while he searched for a job elsewhere. He cursed under his breath, thinking of the current unemployment rate—the highest it'd ever been in Will's lifetime.

Maybe this murder victim had been a mechanic, and Will could take his job.

"Fine then," he spat.

They drove for two hours through the hilly farmlands of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Cows imprisoned in barbed wire pastures chewed their cud. The first bloody touches of autumn showed at the tops of sugar maples and basswoods. Lounds stared at him through the side-view mirror. Will's stomach flipped on every downhill.

The Cadillac's tires crunched into the gravel lot of a road-side farm stand. Someone had scribbled prices on a chalkboard, "Pick your own apples! Gala, Gold Delicious, McIntosh Red!" Now the lot was packed with police cars and their flashing lights.

"Who's this?" Crawford snapped, eyeing Lounds.

"He's another student of mine," Chilton said. "I thought this would be an educational experience."

"What is this, a school field trip? You two stay here while I show Graham in."

Chilton puffed up. "You've asked me to profile killers before. Wouldn't you like a second opinion?"

"That was years ago. I'm looking for fresh eyes."

"As Will's supervisor, it's my duty to provide guidance and ensure his safety in situations like this, especially considering what happened to the last trainee you consulted."

Miriam Lass, Will recalled. She disappeared while investigating the Ripper two years ago. A low blow on Chilton's part.

Crawford scowled. "Last time I checked, Will was a trained police officer and you were a desk jockey shrink."

Will winced. Crawford had read his file.

"I'm not going in without Chilton." Might as well let him see the crime scene and avoid a questioning later. That should earn him some favor.

Crawford led them past caution tape and into the orchard where they were debriefed in crime scene etiquette. Though they were told not to touch anything, an agent took their fingerprints and handed them gloves. Another took pictures of the soles of their shoes.

They trudged up a frost-covered hill toward a gnarled tree silhouetted at the crest. It was choked with apples and much wider than its pruned brethren lined up in rows below. Officers swarmed around it, snapping pictures and staking crime scene flags in the switchgrass.

A man was propped up against the trunk. His neck was elegantly curved, face upturned to branches overhead. His legs were casually folded to one side and draped with white cloth. It was a feminine posture. Save for the apples that filled the cavern of his hollowed abdominal cavity, he might've been relaxing at a picnic. His small intestine extended upward from the morbid cornucopia and wrapped several times around the tree before draping over the lowest boughs like garland. Horseflies buzzed around the viscera.

An apple painted with gold leaf was clamped in his mouth. The cherry at the top of the sundae.

Will glanced at the tableau for two seconds before looking away. "This is what you wanted me to see?"

"The victim's name was Benjamin Raspail, thirty-two years old," Crawford read. "Came from a family of orchestra musicians. Played the flute. Last seen yesterday night at a club in upper Mount Vernon."

"The gay bar?" Chilton asked and gagged on the stench of rotting viscera. He held a handkerchief over his nose.

"You don't need me here for this," Will said. "You already know what I'm going to say."

"Walk me through it. The faster you talk, the sooner you can leave."

"Alright then, yes, it's the Ripper."

"Come on. That's it? How do you know it's him? Do what you did when you wrote your Hobbs profile."

Will didn't want to. He already felt himself slipping. Another look and he would be swept into the Ripper's consciousness. "It's not easy."

"How can I help?"

"Send the officers away." Best to limit the emotional contamination.

When it was just the three of them, Will took off his glasses and closed his eyes. Chilton's watch ticked at his wrist, slower and slower, until time stopped.

When he looked again, the world was warmer, as though lit by a halogen bulb. His nerves sang bright and clear, migraine absent for the first time in days. Even the air smelled sweeter, reaching deeper into his lungs.

The pig staggers up to his apartment door and fumbles with his key, completely inebriated. It takes moments to inject him with a sedative. I expertly squeeze the life out of him, rendering him unconscious.

I relocate to my workshop where I prepare the sculptural elements of my tableau. I drain him from small incisions made at the collarbone and jugular. Cause of death is blood loss. Only when his flesh is marble white do I begin to carve. I remove all abdominal organs, cauterize

the peritoneum, and thread wire around the cavity opening to maintain its tureen shape. I wash the body clean before taking it to the orchard.

There is no anger. I don't hate him anymore than I would a slaughtered animal, but I take pleasure in his indignity. With glee, I drive a stake through his neck to pin it to the trunk, canted just so. In death, he gazes longingly at the heavens, the apples above forever out of reach.

As Will told this to a grim-faced Crawford, color leached out of the landscape until it returned to its original dull grays and browns. His migraine returned with a vengeance.

"Do you see how the fabric drapes here?" Will knelt and examined the white linen that fell from one shoulder and wrapped around Raspail's lower body. "He used wet cloth to intentionally arrange each fold, a technique dating back to ancient Greek sculpture. Clings to the body to better show off its form. I wouldn't be surprised if this whole arrangement was a reference to classical antiquity."

"What, like the Garden of Eden? Raspail took a bite from the tree of knowledge?" Crawford considered. "The intestine kind of looks like a snake."

Will shook his head. "Doesn't fit. The Ripper wouldn't kill Eve. He'd be more interested in offering the forbidden fruit."

"It's a gilded apple," Chilton pointed out. "Isn't that the Apple of Discord? Paris had to give it to the most beautiful goddess, leading to the Trojan war."

"Greek mythology fits the visual language," Will conceded. "But-"

Chilton raised his arms, painting his vision in the air. "I see it now. A jilted lover, blind with jealousy, is driven to a crime of passion. Then his madness lifts. Distraught, he creates this sculpture to honor Raspail, who himself was an artist of music."

Will felt a twinge of repugnance. The Ripper was offended.

"That's one theory," Crawford said diplomatically.

"If the Ripper is 'romantic' it's in the sense of eighteenth-century Romanticism," Will said. "I would read up on gold apples if I were you. That's all I got."

Escaping the noise, Will broke off from the group and picked his way back through the apple trees. He stepped under the caution tape into the gravel lot. A camera flash went off. He blinked the spots from his vision to find Lounds holding a Nikon SLR.

"Enjoying yourself?" Lounds smirked.

"Not as much as you are." Will pushed past him and made for Chilton's Cadillac.

Lounds stuffed his camera in his bag and followed at his heels. His hot breath curled around Will's ear.

“The FBI, consulting you of all people about a murder. The public would be scandalized if they knew.”

“Yeah, go tell your father all about it. Make sure to include the part where you’re a perverted blowhard.”

“Feeling violent today, are we? Shall I fetch the straitjacket?”

Will’s hunting knife flitted across Lounds’s throat. Arterial blood sprayed across Will’s glasses and landed as far as the nearest row of McIntoshes, seven feet away. Falling to his knees, gurgling and choking, Lounds clutched his neck fruitlessly. Unsatisfied, Will pulled out his .38 Special and popped him in the forehead, leaving a perfectly round hole. More blood and bone exploded as the bullet exited the back of his skull. The force of it threw Lounds backward. He fell to the gravel, silent at last.

Will imagined this but didn’t move, breaths short and shallow. His knife was in his truck. He no longer carried a gun, having surrendered it to the New Orleans police department two years ago.

Lounds backed off as Chilton approached. Will spent the drive back to Baltimore trying not to think. Not of golden apples. Not of gunshot wounds. Nothing besides autumn leaves carried in the gentle flow of a stream.

That afternoon Will was picking up milk and eggs at the supermarket when he spotted Hannibal examining pomegranates in the produce section. This store was far from the type of delicatessens or fromageries he imagined Hannibal frequented. A staccato drumbeat kicked in Will’s chest. His head felt distended, his eyes like two grapes on the verge of popping.

“Are you following me?” he demanded.

Hannibal gestured to his own basket, which was already full of items. “I could ask the same of you.”

Will caught Hannibal’s anodyne gaze and was sucked in once more. He couldn’t tell if Hannibal was lying. That thought expanded in his chest like an iridescent soap bubble until there was no room left for anger. Emptied out, he was left ashamed and confused at his paranoia.

“Some coincidence.”

“Perhaps we’re vibrating at the same frequency. Either way, I’m glad to see you’re safe. Dreadful news today.”

“The story spread that fast?”

“The loss of the BSO’s first chair flutist has caused quite a buzz among its patrons.”

Will shuddered. They had attended Raspail’s final performance a few nights ago.

Hannibal handed him a pomegranate. “What do you think of this one?”

Will squeezed it, reluctant to break eye contact. “It’s heavy. Does that mean it’s good?”

The pomegranate stirred some deeply buried memories of the Greek myths he’d learned in high school. Women were always being deceived, kidnapped, or raped in those narratives. Hannibal’s painting of Leda and the Swan flashed before him.

“You’re something of a mythology buff, aren’t you? Do gold apples ring any bells?”

Hannibal’s gaze sharpened. He was trying and failing to hide his interest. Mythology buff, indeed. “Golden apples appear several times in the Western canon. Why do you ask?”

“Behavioral Science wants me to do a project for them.” Will was letting his curiosity get the best of him. That wasn’t good.

“Is this connected to Raspail?”

“I don’t think I’m allowed to say.” But Will wanted to.

Hannibal was so eager. He reminded Will of his homicide partner from his cop days. He chewed his lip, suddenly hungry.

“How about we meet tomorrow to discuss this?” Hannibal suggested. “I’ll reflect on golden apples in the meantime.”

Will placed the pomegranate in Hannibal’s basket. “I’ll be at the Peabody Library tomorrow afternoon.”

At dusk Will drove to an isolated stretch of the Gunpowder River. He waded out, cast his latest nymph, an Elk Hair Caddis, and tried to clear his mind. Orange streaks played out over the sky as shadows swallowed up the edges of the creek, turning everything black and blue.

Will felt them bobbing around his legs at first. Glistening apples drifted downstream. Behind him came a *plunk, plunk, plunk*—watery footsteps and more apples falling into the river. He was paralyzed. There was no point in looking, he knew exactly who it was. Intrusive images flashed before him anyway. Cassie Boyle. Benjamin Raspail. Freddy Lounds. With trembling hands, he reeled the line in and cast again.

He didn’t catch the trout he’d hoped for that night but left with a stringer of bluegill.

Deluge

Monday, September 26th, 1983

Will began to wonder if something was wrong with him when he woke up shivering in the middle of Hawthorne Avenue, wearing only a t-shirt and boxers, drenched with sweat.

His visual imagination was much stronger than the average person's. Even so, that didn't explain the dragon. Black scales glittering like starlight. It slithered down from the maple branches to the pavement. Twenty feet long at least. Ink dripped from its mouth as it moved closer, growling. Mere inches away, it opened its toothy maw to scent him.

With short, panicked inhales, Will smelled meat on its breath. He closed his eyes, waiting for fangs to sink into his neck.

But the bite never came. Judgment made, the dragon retreated, slid between a neighbor's hedges, and disappeared.

The basement door was swinging on its hinges when Will returned. Not sure if this was a dream, he went upstairs to make coffee, not to drink but for the familiarity of routine. The coffee machine burbled its song. He poured a cup.

It was much earlier than he usually woke up, so he was startled when Chilton appeared reading the contents of a folder in a bathrobe.

"Crawford faxed over a file last night. More evidence from the Raspail case."

Chilton kissed the side of Will's mouth as if it was their daily custom. Will froze, every hair standing on end.

"Fabulous, thank you," Chilton said as he absently traded the file for Will's cup of coffee. He shuffled into the breakfast nook.

Will stood stupefied. Poison spread from where Chilton's lips had touched him. He wiped at his mouth. He ran to the breakfast nook, but it was empty, as was the rest of the first floor. Still, he held Crawford's file. He warped it to make sure it was real. The folder was full of typewritten forms and pictures from the orchard. He pinched himself, but nothing happened.

Unsure if he should get behind the wheel in this state, Will nevertheless drove to DC. He sat through a behavioral criminology lecture, not registering a single word from the professor. At Will's office hours, Julie Pierce came to ask for her grade from the last assignment. Surprised at himself, Will realized that he'd forgotten to finish grading Lounds's portion of the essays. But they were in his bag. If he wanted, he could hand them back as Lounds had graded them, failing Pierce's sterling efforts. Her eager eyes, bright with ambition under the department's fluorescent lighting, reminded him of a young Alana. He wasn't so heartless. He told Pierce to come back next week.

It was late afternoon when Will made it back to Baltimore. He stopped at a newsstand only to find his own face staring back at him. It was the shot Lounds had taken of him ducking under the caution tape at the orchard, now printed on the front page of the National Tattler.

IT TAKES ONE TO CATCH ONE: FBI CONSULTS KILLING MACHINE
By Rob Lounds

WINCHESTER, VA - The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's first chair flutist, Benjamin Raspail, age 32, was found brutally murdered at a family-run apple orchard the morning of Sept 25th, 1983. The killer removed his stomach and intestines before stuffing him with apples and arranging his body in a horrific display.

Early reports suggest that the culprit is the Chesapeake Ripper, whose last reign of terror lasted from 1975 to 1977 with an estimated nine murders.

To catch this psychopathic slayer, the FBI is consulting another: William (Will) Graham, age 26.

"Death Angel" Graham was discharged from the New Orleans police force in 1980 after killing five people, including recent mother Evelda Drumgo, in a deadly shoot-out. The encounter landed him in an asylum for six weeks. The nature of Graham's mental disorder was not revealed, but one psychiatric worker called it "psychosis caused by deep depression."

As a homicide detective, Graham had one of the highest closure rates in the country. Now he's a PhD student studying criminal psychology under Dr. Frederick Chilton at George Washington University.

An anonymous source reported that Graham has an obsession with violent crime that allows him to assume the identity of a murderer.

"Graham's chummy with the patients at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. He describes forensic evidence from the perspective of the killer, like *he* was the one who did it. You'd think he's the Ripper's apprentice. I wouldn't get on his bad side," we were warned.

Despite this, the FBI seems to think that Graham is their best shot at catching the homicidal lunatic. Only time will tell if their gamble pays off.

The Ripper's apprentice? He imagined how the Ripper would feel reading that line. Amused, maybe, but more likely insulted. There was no better way to paint a target on Will's back. Lounds was trying to kill him. He paid for the Baltimore Sun and stormed away.

Will stepped through the massive wooden doors of the George Peabody Library and stared up at the cathedral of special collections. Ornamental cast-iron balconies and marble columns surrounded the sixty-foot-high atrium. The exposed, heavenly light made him long for the

stuffy Enoch Pratt periodicals room. Will wandered the five floors before giving up and asking a librarian for assistance.

“Golden apples, huh? Let’s see.”

The girl at the front desk snapped bubblegum and twisted her permed hair as she flipped through the catalog. She kept peeking at Will from under her bangs.

Had she seen the Tattler’s headline too? Will shifted from foot to foot, half expecting armed authorities to rush in and haul him away.

“You’ll want the second floor, row M.” The librarian scribbled a list of titles and passed it to Will.

“A lot of stuff about Hesperides. Not sure what that is.” She pronounced it “hesper-ides.”

“Thanks,” Will mumbled.

“I haven’t seen you around before. Do you go to Johns Hopkins?”

“No, sorry.”

Will beat a hasty retreat before she could reply. She’d included her phone number amongst the list of titles. He couldn’t imagine why. For the next hour, though they were on different floors of the library, he couldn’t shake the feeling that she was watching him. Either way, her suggestions proved fruitful. When Hannibal slid into the seat opposite him, the sun was low in the sky and Will had plenty to share.

“The golden apples of Greek myth all come from a tree in the Garden of the Hesperides,” Will explained. “Anyone who ate from this tree became immortal, never suffering hunger, pain, or illness again. Gods and mortals alike coveted the apples, so Gaia ordered the goddess-nymphs Hesperides to attend the tree, policed by the great dragon Ladon.” The dragon from this morning flashed before him. “Ladon was later slain by Hercules during his eleventh labor.”

“Poma ab insomni concustodita dracone,” Hannibal agreed. “But how is this connected to the murder?”

Will paged through an art history text and showed Hannibal a painting by Frederic Leighton. “The nymph in front—Raspail was positioned just like her, sitting under a tree, but with a gold leaf apple in his mouth.”

Hannibal held his mouth open for a second as he stared at the depiction. “The Nymphs of Dusk, representing the colors of autumn. But from what I recall of Raspail, he wasn’t much of a nymph.”

“You met Raspail? What was he like?”

“We never spoke directly, but he was a very anxious man. Phlegmy. Incompetent. It was an open secret that his career was the product of nepotism, his father having strong ties to the

BSO."

"An unskilled flutist hoisted to first chair by his daddy?"

Will closed his eyes and returned to the crime scene, this time surrounded by xeric shrubs and cypress instead of the frosted hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The Mediterranean lapped at the shore in the distance. A warm breeze caressed Will's face.

Raspail reached to pluck an apple from the branch above him. The apple crunched as he bit into it. Juice dripped down his chin.

"The nymphs would sometimes taste the apples, angering Gaia," Will recalled. "Raspail was a swine posing as a clear-voiced nymph, grasping at unearned immortality. And now he's truly immortalized through this transformation. It's a mockery."

Hannibal was keen. "There are other mentions of golden apples. Perhaps the killer was referencing the footrace of Atalanta and Hippomenes."

"I don't know that one."

"Atalanta was one of the maiden huntswomen of Artemis. Devoutly chaste, she declared that she would only marry the man who could outrun her, but any who lost to her in a footrace would be put to death. Many suitors died in their attempt to win her hand. Hippomenes, desperately in love, sought the help of Aphrodite, who gave him three golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides. One by one, he dropped the apples during their race. Atalanta was compelled to stop to pick each one up. Her distraction slowed her enough that Hippomenes won by a hair's breadth.

"The myth goes that Hippomenes forgot to honor the gods for their help in securing his wife. As punishment, they were transformed into lions and spent the rest of their lives in a dark wood, hunting side by side."

"I don't see how that relates to Raspail."

"It doesn't. I fear that this golden apple may be a red herring, dropped to distract you into losing the footrace. The Chesapeake Ripper has taunted the FBI in such a way before."

A shudder slammed shut in Will's chest. "You've seen the Tattler."

Hannibal had the decency to look ashamed. "It was an unfortunate article. For what it's worth, I don't believe everything I read."

His reassurance did little to comfort Will. "Well I don't buy the Atalanta angle. It's too sloppy a metaphor. A marriage proposal? To whom? Crawford? The Ripper would sooner choke."

Hannibal remained composed. "Perhaps it's not an offer of marriage but the desire to see a great hunter's downfall."

“I just don’t see it.” Now he remembered why he avoided collaboration. Will started packing his books into his shoulder bag. The windowed ceiling stretched impossibly high. The walls began breathing and closing in. “The Ripper wouldn’t be so desperate for the FBI’s attention.”

The dismissal clearly vexed Hannibal. Will had conceived of him as a mechanical automaton, but here he was, gears slipping for a moment, human after all.

“It was a good thought,” Will conceded lamely.

“No matter.” Hannibal reached for Will’s copy of the Baltimore Sun, which was open to the Help Wanted section. Several listings were circled in ballpoint pen. “Looking for a side job?”

“Looking for alternative employment. My time at George Washington University is coming to a close.” Will tried to snatch the Sun back and missed it by about a foot before he corrected himself. Why was his body betraying him?

“Surely not.” Hannibal looked scandalized.

“Chilton strongarmed me into this Ripper mess, and he freaks me out in other ways. It’s time to get out from under his thumb, degree or no degree.”

“How does he freak you out?”

Will hesitated. “He can be handsy. Misses his ex-wife, I assume. But he kissed me this morning. I think. I’m not sure.”

“You don’t know?”

“I might have imagined it.” Will winced. That sounded bad. “Anyway, Chilton, this case, the Tattler, it’s not worth it. I shouldn’t have even bothered researching this today.”

“If Heimlich is retired and you’re quitting, who will Agent Crawford call?”

“I’m sure Crawford has plenty of men. And Alana graduates soon. She’s as good as me. Better even.”

Hannibal looked doubtful. Will finished packing and left before the walls closed in.

Tuesday, September 27th, 1983

Having run out of frozen waffles, Chilton ventured into the pantry to fix his own breakfast for the first time in months. Moving aside the moth-ridden cereal boxes, he was confronted with a pile of black mush covered in white speckles which he deduced was a bunch of rotten bananas. Green mold spotted the only loaf of bread. He pinched one end of the bag and went to toss it. A cloud of fruit flies rose from the trashcan when he lifted the lid.

Chilton could forgive the dusty bookshelves, could overlook the laundry piling up in the hall, but this was beyond the pale. He brewed his morning coffee and considered how to mention this to Will, whose fragile ego he'd crushed so recently, and in front of Freddy no less. But even Will should see that he was in violation of their unspoken contract.

He found him sitting in the breakfast nook in front of an untouched glass of water. He stared straight ahead, unmoving.

"Have you seen the pantry?" Chilton began. "It's absolutely disgusting. I must insist you start taking your chores more seriously."

Will didn't respond. Great, he was drunk again.

"Really, this is getting ridiculous." He snapped his fingers in front of Will's face. "Will! Are you awake?"

"I don't know," Will mumbled.

Chilton examined Will's pupils and found them abnormally wide. His skin was clammy. He wondered if he should be worried about alcohol poisoning.

"Lay off the booze, would you? We don't want you getting brain damage now that we're in contact with Crawford."

Will grunted.

Chilton sipped his coffee. He'd wanted to study Will ever since he'd mentioned his condition. After watching him do his "thing" at the orchard yesterday, he was even more curious. Any scholarship on Will's unique cocktail of neuroses and personality disorders would be as valuable to psychological science as his profile on Hobbs. If Will was blackout drunk maybe now was his chance.

"Can you stand up, Will?"

Will fumbled to his feet. Chilton half-carried him to his study and plopped him in the seat opposite his desk. This was the first time Will had stepped foot in his office. Normally he was too skittish to approach the doorway.

Chilton set up a tape recorder and hit the red button. "I want you to explain, in your own words, how your empathy affects your daily life."

Will opened his mouth and more words spilled out than he'd ever spoken at one time in Chilton's presence. He told him, in fractured, halting phrases, that he couldn't look others in the eyes without seeing the darkness of their thoughts, their judgment, hypocrisy, and crimes yet uncommitted. He couldn't form attachments having seen the black threads woven into their souls, and having seen them the threads were forever seared to the backs of his eyelids.

"Something in me—mirrors whoever I look at. Wish I knew what it was. Wish someone would cut it out. I'm so… tired."

How interesting.

“I want to help you, Will, but first I’ll have to conduct some tests.”

Chilton turned on his projector and showed Will a series of images. He responded well to the Thematic Apperception Test but started shaking when Chilton showed him images of the Ripper’s past murders taken from the file Crawford had faxed over.

“Why did he display Jeremy Olmstead like this?” Chilton asked. “Every tool in his workshop was driven into his body postmortem.”

“No. I don’t know.” His face twisted as if Chilton was holding a torch under his feet.

“Come on, try for me.”

Will’s thumbs were pressed tight to his trembling palms. “I can’t feel my hands.”

“You don’t need your hands, just look. Here’s Cassie Boyle. You know this one. You said that the crime scene was practically gift wrapped. What was the Ripper trying to tell the FBI with her?”

Will looked and looked. Gradually, his twitching subsided, and his contorted countenance smoothed. He turned and met Chilton’s eyes, smiling.

“You’re in a chatty mood today. I’d rather discuss Inelle and little Billy. How are they?”

***

When Will came to, he was at the Peabody Library, sitting at the same table as yesterday. Rosy light streamed through the glass ceiling. Hannibal sat across from him, hands folded as if in prayer. What was he doing here? What was Will doing, for that matter?

“How long have I been here?” he asked, overwhelmed with déjà vu.

“I just arrived, but it looks like you’ve been studying for a while.” Hannibal examined the materials spread before Will. At some point he had checked out a translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Burkert’s *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, and a slim volume titled *De figuris Veneris* which appeared to be a manual of classical erotology.

“Was I sleeping?”

“You weren’t present. Your eyes were open, staring into the middle-distance.”

“I don’t remember how I got here,” he admitted. His migraine flared up. He clutched his temples.

Hannibal studied him. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I was in Chilton’s office. He was doing something to me.”

“What was he doing?”

“I’m not sure. He asked questions and there were pictures. Raspail and the other victims. But maybe I was seeing things. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“It sounds like psychic driving,” Hannibal mused. “Highly unethical by today’s standards. I wonder what he was trying to do.”

Will’s heart raced. “Psychoanalysis, or something like it. That prick. He wants to publish me as a case study. Jesus.”

“Concentrate on remaining calm.” He passed a pen and paper across the table. “On this paper, draw a clock face showing the current time while thinking of who and where you are.”

“Why?”

“A grounding exercise, nothing more. I want you to remember the present moment. The now.”

Will huffed. “This feels like you’re tying mittens to my coat sleeves.”

“Indulge me.”

He checked Chilton’s watch, then immediately ripped it off and stuffed it in his bag.

“It’s six fifteen, I’m in Baltimore, Maryland. My name is Will Graham. I don’t know how grounded I feel, though.”

He slid the paper back across the table.

Hannibal looked at his drawing. “Excellent,” he said without skipping a beat. “I’m going to step out for a moment to speak with my supervisor. Please, remain here and allow me to escort you home this evening.”

“You’re not going to tell some doctor about me?” Will asked, near panic.

“Of course not. Stay calm and await my return.”

Few people remained in the library past sunset. Will felt their stares on his back, but they were never looking at him when he turned around. To distract himself he perused his bizarre reading selection.

He couldn’t imagine what possessed him to choose *De figuris Veneris*. It seemed to be a collection of academic descriptions of sex positions favored by the Ancient Greeks written by scholars pretending not to be aroused. “Never did a work more serious issue from the press,” the author claimed. “Here we have no curious erotic story born of a diseased mind, but a cold, relentless analysis of those human passions which it is ever the object of Science to wrestle with and overthrow.” Will felt dirty for touching the pages. Still, he slid it into his bag with his other books when Hannibal returned.

Hannibal parked in front of Chilton's house and followed him around to the basement entrance. Will knew when he was being coddled and he didn't like it.

"You can go home now. I'm not a child."

"Let me see you in."

Will didn't want Hannibal to see his basement dwelling with its sad cot and messy desk but couldn't find an excuse to keep him out. He unlocked the door and let it swing open.

The foreboding sound of running water came from the room. Will flipped on the light.

A good two inches pooled in the basement floor, already soaking the cardboard boxes housing Chilton's nuptial keepsakes. Will sloshed his way to the far corner where water gushed out of a pipe. The water main had burst.

Will rushed up the stairs and searched for Chilton, who he found singing in the tub. He pounded on the bathroom door until he emerged in a cloud of steam with a towel wrapped around his head.

"My God, where's the fire?" Chilton asked.

"Basement flooding. Call the plumber."

"What?" he cried as Will ran back downstairs.

Hannibal had found a suitcase and filled it with the few articles of clothing in the wardrobe. He stood over Will's desk, holding the contents of the drawer where he'd buried the Hobbs profile.

"Give that here." Will snatched the papers and haphazardly threw them into the suitcase along with a collection of books. The typewriter and anything else of value he placed on a high shelf, hoping for the best.

The water was up to their ankles when they left. Will headed for his truck parked in the laneway, carrying his suitcase in one hand and tackle box in the other. He didn't know where he'd go, but he wasn't going to move into one of Chilton's upstairs bedrooms.

"Will." Hannibal paced after him. "May I offer you my guest room tonight?"

"I'm fine. I'll go to DC, see if Alana has space on her floor." That was a lie. He would drive to the river, sleep in his truck, and apply for jobs the next morning.

"That's an hour away," Hannibal argued. "Forgive me, but I don't think you're fit to drive right now."

"*Fuck off*." But Will stopped in his tracks. How would he send out his resume without stationary?

Hannibal gently took his suitcase and tackle box and set them aside. Will didn't realize how badly he was trembling until he was enfolded in Hannibal's arms, face firmly pressed against his coat lapel. The pressure was soothing, as if the hand was holding the plates of his skull together so they wouldn't burst apart. They stood like that until his shivering stopped.

"I want you to take advantage of me," Hannibal said. "Don't make me ask again."

***

Will stood in Hannibal's kitchen watching him pan-fry thin slices of Raspail's abdominis muscles. Simple fare for an unexpected but most welcome guest. Hannibal had planned to cure the meat for four hundred days and serve it to Will as prosciutto roses. Now he didn't think they would have so much time together.

Hannibal was thankful to have discovered Will's encephalitis before anyone else. Without the meddling of outside parties Will would become delirious and spend more time confined to Hannibal's townhouse. Based on his symptoms he estimated Will had at most three weeks before becoming catatonic, at which point he could easily snuff him out—unless he suffered a stroke in the meantime.

Will was a dying star burning brightest before his last gasp. It was disappointing that his hunter was not in top form. Besting Will would not be as satisfying as he'd hoped, but it would still be diverting.

He sliced open a pomegranate—the one he and Will had selected together at the market—and plated the abdominis with a scattering of its seeds.

They ate in silence, Will too wrung out for conversation, Hannibal content to watch him nourish himself. He admired the aromas at the table. Bloody flank steak and rich butter melted into Will's personal musk. The fevered sweetness of inflammation was the memento mori to their still life.

Will watched the ships drift along the Patapsco River from the balcony while Hannibal drew him a bath and laid out a fresh set of pajamas in the guest bedroom. Will managed to bathe himself before crawling into bed and passing out, sleep aided by the sedative in his drink.

Hannibal sat at his bedside and monitored the pulse at Will's wrist. It was steady for now.

Encephalitis opened a new realm of possibilities as long as Hannibal could control certain factors. Chilton was one of them. As tiresome as he was, the man had his uses. He'd motivated Will's involvement with the FBI and inadvertently driven him into Hannibal's arms, but his officious interest in Will's psyche could pose a problem. The thought of Chilton using Will as a surrogate for his ex-wife irked, but the thought of him rummaging through Will's mind was unacceptable. Best to limit their contact.

The Tattler article had come as a pleasant surprise. Hannibal had expected the usual fare: overwrought horror and a rehash of his tableaus from six years ago. He'd been delighted by Will's stormy visage splashed across the front page, framed by caution tape and autumn foliage.

He vaguely remembered reading about the New Orleans fish market massacre two years ago, but he hadn't realized Will had been the officer at the center of the controversy. It tickled him to see Will's humble body count reported beside his own. Will claimed his kills publicly. How must that feel?

Will knew too well that he contained the elements to make murder; perhaps mercy too. He understood murder uncomfortably well, though, and that frightened him. So he carried himself through life as though he were a loaded gun. Would his trigger finger slip as his disease progressed?

Hours passed as Hannibal rested his thumb against Will's radial artery. He watched the rise and fall of Will's chest and imagined his heart fluttering against the confines of his ribcage. Tomorrow morning the eagles would alight on him to rip out his liver once more. Hannibal fixed this image of Promethean suffering in his mind. He would reproduce it in charcoal later.

Time was fleeting. Omnia mutantur, nihil interit.

***

Dolarhyde finished the last of his soda and crunched the can into the tree's crotch. He sat twenty feet up a maple behind Dr. Frederick Chilton's house, surveying the windows with binoculars.

Monday's Tattler was spread open in his lap. He'd read the article on Will Graham many times since purchasing it in St. Louis. The photo on the cover was smudged with fingerprints and drops of water, obscuring half of Graham's face.

From what Dolarhyde had witnessed that morning, Graham was a stunted and weak-willed man. He'd doddered out of the side entrance, nearly slipping in the wet grass on his way to the avenue. *The Ripper's Apprentice*. What could Graham possibly understand about the Ripper, about the awesome transformation that Dolarhyde and the Ripper were undergoing?

And Chilton—what a funny chap, with his oiled hair and expensive briefcase—had pranced to his fancy little car and driven off. Much like a poodle.

Dolarhyde waited hours for their return. Night had fallen when a sleek black car parked in the laneway below him. A third man approached the side entrance and let himself in with a key. A friend of Graham's? He had neat hair, wore a dun-colored suede coat, and carried a hacksaw under one arm. He didn't spend long in Chilton's basement, emerging five minutes later and driving away.

Forty minutes passed. The mystery man returned, this time escorting Graham by the arm. Their bodies blocked most of Dolarhyde's view through the doorway, but he could see dappled light reflecting off pooling water.

A basement leak. It didn't take a genius to put two and two together. The man had sabotaged Graham's plumbing, but why?

A flurry of activity, then an agitated Graham emerged with a suitcase. Dolarhyde caught some names. *Hannibal. Alana.*

The two men embraced. Dolarhyde had to suppress a cough of revulsion. Was Graham queer to boot?

The mystery man's face was obscured by the darkness, but with his binoculars Dolarhyde could just make out his expression—or lack thereof. He had the red eyes of Lucifer. The Red Dragon stirred, recognizing an equal. Could it be…?

Dolarhyde hurried down the branches and through a neighbor's yard to reach his van before they drove away. He'd never tailed someone on the highway before. It was more difficult than he'd anticipated, but he managed to follow the Bentley through the streets of Baltimore to a townhouse.

He couldn't inconspicuously climb a tree in this neighborhood, so he settled for watching with binoculars from his van. The view wasn't great. He could just make out the mystery man's head walking to-and-fro on the second floor. Eventually a light on the third floor clicked on. Dolarhyde watched Graham change into pajamas.

The Ripper had gotten to Graham before Dolarhyde had. There must be a reason why he was keeping Graham alive. What game was he playing?

Dolarhyde had planned to take out Graham and his poodle tonight, but this changed everything. The Dragon wouldn't mind a change in schedule.

A Far, Far Better Thing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wednesday, September 28th, 1983

Sobering gray dawn shone through the damask curtains, waking Will. It took effort to climb over the mountain of pillows and out of bed. He laughed at the absurdity of himself wearing Hannibal's silk shirt in Hannibal's guest bed in Hannibal's townhouse, but he couldn't deny that he felt refreshed for the first time in weeks.

There was movement in the kitchen. Wanting to thank him, Will went down to catch Hannibal before he hurried to the hospital. Instead, he found him scrambling eggs. Two cups of tea sat on the kitchen island. Will took one and smelled cloves and orange, letting steam fog his glasses.

Hannibal appraised him, probably wondering if he was still on the verge of a mental break.

"I'm not going to kill myself or whatever you were thinking last night. You can go to the hospital. I'll clean up here."

"I just got back from inpatient rounds and am not expected at the operating room for another hour." Hannibal plated two dishes of eggs with chives, sausage, and blistered cherry tomatoes and set them on the kitchen island.

The food was tempting, but Will didn't sit, not wanting to take advantage more than he already had.

"Your supervisor sure is lenient."

Hannibal smiled and met Will's eyes. "After working together for six years, we know each other very well."

His eye contact was tranquilizing, as always, and Will relaxed into it readily. Warmth spread up from his lower back, through his shoulders and neck, and wrapped around his cranium. This time there was a sinister undercurrent. Hannibal was making a private joke. *After six years, he knows his supervisor's secrets well enough to pose a threat*.

Will thought back to his encounter with Dr. Du Maurier at the Symphony Hall. In retrospect, she could've been high on Quaaludes or ketamine. Was she self-prescribing?

"So that's how you have so much time to run around Baltimore."

That took Hannibal aback, but the doorbell rang before he could respond. He went downstairs to answer it.

“Did you see the Tattler?” Alana entered the foyer with the rustle of her coat and the thump of her boots coming off. “I drove up as soon as I heard, but I couldn't find Will anywhere. He’s probably at the university—we must have passed each other on I-95. Could I crash here? I’ll try again at Chilton’s tonight.”

She bounded up the stairs and saw Will.

“Oh. Hi, there.”

Will grimaced and set down his tea. “Hello, Alana.”

“I didn’t realize you two…?”

“Chilton’s basement flooded, so I stayed here for the night. I was just about to leave.”

Will climbed the stairs to the guest bedroom. He got dressed, threw on several layers, and grabbed his shoulder bag, trying not to hear the conversation in the kitchen.

“Thanks for taking care of him.”

“No need for thanks. I offered for purely selfish reasons.”

“Do you know if he saw the Tattler, or—?”

A pause.

“And is he…?”

Will climbed back down, making his way to the exit. “Thanks for coming all this way to check on me, but I’m fine, really.”

“Where are you headed? I’ll meet you there.”

Even Will didn’t know where he was going. He told her a random location—the Walters Art Gallery—and barely restrained himself from running out the front door.

On the bus, he closed his eyes to avoid the faces of other passengers, but that brought him back to Hannibal’s kitchen. Alana sat at the island, enjoying the breakfast he’d refused and discussing his maladaptations with Hannibal, who cleaned the dishes and prepared for a day of surgery. The afterimage of their casual familiarity lingered when he opened his eyes, superimposed over the blur of city sidewalks.

To distract himself, Will grabbed a book from his shoulder bag at random: *The Metamorphoses*. Perhaps due to the similarity of her name to Alana’s, he found himself searching for Atalanta in the index: “(1) heroine of Calydonian hunting scenes, loved by Maleager, 215-19; (2) runner of famous race against Hippomenes, 288-92.”

“…last came Atalanta,
The heroine of the Arcadian forests:
A smartly polished brooch held her loose cloak,

Her hair was drawn back in a single twist;
At her left shoulder swung an ivory quiver
Which as she walked echoed a bell-like sound
Of arrows striking time; in her left hand
She held a bow: this was her costume, graced
By all the beauty of simplicity.
Her lovely face seemed boyish for a virgin
And yet was far too girlish for a boy,
And when the Calydonian hero saw her,
Love at first sight had turned his heart to fire.
God was to intervene, forbidding it.
"O fortunate young man," he cried, "if she
Finds him a lover fit to hold her hand."
He said no more: the moment was not ripe
For thoughts of love. There were great things to do,
And he was urged to face a larger battle."

Though it pained him, Will read on. Ovid described a series of tragic figures tortured by love: Hercules slain by his unwitting wife, spurned Byblis melted into tears from love for her brother, and the star-crossed lesbians Iphis and Ianthe. Their desires were so vibrant, and often so perverse, he might as well have been reading a *Hustler* magazine in public. He was light-headed when he got off the bus.

The gallery had an extensive Greek and Roman collection. Will wandered amongst a group of bronze statuettes depicting the Twelve Labors of Hercules. In one, the hero raised a club over his head, poised to kill the dragon Ladon, who held its talons up in surrender, visage frozen in an eternal scream. The longer he looked, the more alive it seemed, until finally the dragon writhed free of Hercules's grasp and turned to face Will.

Alana found him staring at it.

"This reminds me of the time we went to the Art Institute of Chicago together. I had an assignment about some old painter, remember?"

Will was transported to his nineteen-year-old body, sitting on a bench next to Alana before a large impressionist canvas, taut with the tension of their proximity. In yellow overalls and an orange striped sweater, she had been electric against the drab museum walls.

Alana walked around the statuette. "Are you looking to buy?"

"Not this one. Too ugly."

"How about that one?" Two naked men. Hercules wrestling Antaeus.

Will made a face.

"And this?" A man chained to a rock, body convulsing as a bird pecked out his liver.

"Now that I can relate to."

Alana's laugh was like sunshine peeking out from winter clouds. It didn't last long.

"You're not going to consult for the FBI again, are you?"

Will shook his head.

"And you'd tell me if anything was going on?"

"Of course," he lied. He would never disturb her, not when she was in the final stretch of medical school, focused on sub-internships and interviewing for jobs.

"You know I'm only a phone call away."

Will nodded. He wished he could say the same, but he'd soon be homeless.

When would Alana realize that he didn't deserve her concern? She battered herself against his jagged edges out of fruitless compassion. The truth was clear to him now: he didn't belong in her world. It was past time for him to make his exit.

Will savored their last day together. He showed her the best hole-in-the-wall pizza joint he'd found during his time in the city. They walked through Patterson Park and climbed the spiral stairs of the observatory. Alana made small talk with strangers so that Will could pet their dogs. Their conversation was easy as long as Will didn't pay attention to the sleek black dragon that dogged their steps.

Finally, some memories that Will didn't mind keeping forever. He assembled images—a leaf stuck in Alana's hair, their hands holding the same stanchion on the bus, Alana excited to view the Baltimore skyline—and fixed them in his mental scrapbook. Moments that she would soon forget but that Will would revisit again and again until their colors faded and he could no longer distinguish real details from ones his brain had fabricated.

Hannibal was cooking when they returned.

"How are you always in the kitchen?" Alana laughed, pink-faced from the chill. She gamboled up to see what was for dinner.

Will stood back and tried to be happy for them. He went upstairs to pack. It was time for him to go.

***

Hannibal followed Will up and closed the bedroom door behind them. He inhaled deeply. Will's scent had permeated the room in just one night, complementing Hannibal's detergent. He must have sweat through the sheets, unused to sleeping with central heating. The thought made him look forward to making the bed.

"I thought you were staying longer."

"I'm going to check on the situation at Chilton's."

“The basement will still be damp even if it’s drained. You’ll be breathing in mold all night.”

“Well, you know. Three’s a crowd.”

“Alana won’t be staying over.”

Will threw down his bag and turned to Hannibal. “I’m giving you a free pass. Just take the easy way out, would you?”

How infuriating it was to have one’s hospitality rejected. Though in this case it was more like watching a squirrel turn away from one’s baited snare to hop back into a barren wood. The prey’s predicament: would Will starve or strangle?

“Believe it or not, it’s nice to have company. Four floors is a lot of space for one person.”

“Why on earth would you want me, of all people, to stay in your guest bedroom?”

Hannibal wished that Will was on the verge of collapse as he’d been the night before. It’d been simple to draw him into his arms then, to make him pliant with human contact. Finding words was more difficult.

“You’re more interesting than most people.” It wasn’t enough. He needed to set himself apart from the others without scaring him away. “I feel like I can be myself around you. And I want you to feel the same.”

Will held his side as if winded. He spoke with difficulty. “I can tell she really likes you. It’s a lot to ask of me, to be your friend.”

“I know.” Hannibal injected every shred of sincerity he had into those two words.

He didn’t know what convinced Will in the end, but with a huff, he said, “Fine. I’ll stay.”

Will insisted on skipping dinner, unsurprisingly. He hugged Alana goodbye, meeting Hannibal’s eyes over her shoulder. The look said, “Treat her well or I’ll kill you.”

When Alana was one glass of Chardonnay deep, Hannibal thought it safe to broach the topic about which he was most curious.

“You seem to have quite a history with Will. Did you two ever date?”

Alana squinted. “No. We’ve only ever been good friends.”

“Nothing more?”

“I slept with him once or twice.”

The confirmation sent a rush of adrenaline coursing through him, which he cataloged before suppressing.

She swiped a spear of asparagus through sauce, pensive. “I was always firm with him, we were never going to be anything more.”

“Why not? He’s charming and very handsome, even to a man.”

“Charming? You’re the first to say that.” Alana smiled wistfully. “I could never be with Will because I’m professionally interested in him. If he looked me in the eyes, he would see it at once and even friendship would be difficult, but he never does. Perhaps he already knows and doesn’t want to confirm it.”

“You act like he’s a mind reader.”

“Will’s an eidetiker. His visual imagination is so precise he experiences thoughts and memories as projected reality. What he has in addition is pure empathy. He can assume your point of view, or mine—and maybe some other points of view that scare and sicken him. It’s an uncomfortable gift that’s won him few friends. Perception is a tool that’s pointed on both ends.”

“The FBI wants to be his friend now. Did his gift serve him well before, when he was an officer in New Orleans?”

“No,” Alana paused. “He wouldn’t want me to talk about this with you.”

Hannibal considered pushing her, but waiting worked better.

“The Tattler painted it way worse than it was. He was put in a bad spot and made a tough decision that saved his life. Then he was forced to relive it eidetically until, well. Anyone would have a tough time in that scenario. And he was in the psychiatric ward of a normal hospital, not an asylum.”

Hannibal would have to pull up old newspapers at a library if he wanted to know more. He let the subject go.

“How did you feel when he started at George Washington University?”

“I was a little uncomfortable at first. I thought he was following me until he moved to Baltimore. And I’m at Georgetown so our paths never cross. He probably did it on purpose. But I’m the psychologist here. I should be probing you.”

This was where, had he no interest in keeping up appearances, Hannibal would bid her farewell and follow Will to Roland Park. He was loath to leave him alone with Chilton, or, worse, the temptation to drive into the wilderness and never come back, but there was no polite way to kick Alana out in the middle of her meal.

“I’m at your disposal,” he said.

“When was the last time you dated?”

This tepid flirtation continued for several minutes. Returning her volleys was tedious when half his mind was with Will in Chilton’s soggy basement. The part of him that was present

now viewed Alana as two people. One was a friend and a beautiful woman. Overlaying this version was a celluloid film depicting the nineteen-year-old girl Will had fallen in love with seven years ago. Idealized beyond reality, she battled Will's demons and cast them into hell, righteous as Archangel Michael. Hannibal regretted this doubling of her character and considered it a personal failing on his part, but still, the image was not arousing.

It was more stimulating to view this scene as if he were Will. He wondered how fast Will's heart would beat as she rose from the table and climbed upstairs. As she unwrapped her dress, he admired her form as Will would admire it, and when they gave themselves up to the transports of Venus, it struck Hannibal that Will had shared this position with him, linking them across time. He searched her body for Will's scent and, when he found none, recalled it for himself. Nonsensically, he imagined traces of Will's semen still lingered in her womb. It was this thought, above all, that drove him to climax.

Chapter End Notes

Check out the "notes on DfV" tag on my tumblr for fun facts and references. Here's the post for Chapters 1-5.

Enter the Dragon

Thursday, September 29th, 1983

Will didn't return that night.

Hannibal didn't typically sleep more than four hours at a time, so it wasn't unusual for him to stay up past midnight. It was, however, strange for him to remove his sketching materials from his study and take them downstairs to the living room. He faced the stairwell and sharpened his pencil with a scalpel, waiting for the metal clunk of the door unlocking followed by Will's footsteps in the foyer.

He pictured Will's '71 Chevy beater parked along a dirt road in an empty field. Will lay in the truck bed, wrapped in his threadbare quilt or perhaps a sleeping bag stolen from one of Chilton's cardboard boxes. The milky way stretched over the horizon, untarnished by clouds or city lights. The constellations Draco and Hercules guarded Will's fitful slumber.

At five am, he completed his graphite reproduction of Rubens's *Prometheus Bound* with Will as Prometheus. Still Will did not return. At five forty-five, he called Bedelia and asked her to cover his shift for the day. At seven, despite having no interest in eating, he made crepes with sauce from the leftovers of Will's pomegranate. He had just finished garnishing one with an orange rind when he heard an engine shut off and a car door slam.

He opened the front door before they had time to knock, but it wasn't Will. Frederick Chilton graced his front stoop, smelling strongly of lanolin and cologne. Hannibal's mood soured.

"Will said this was where he's staying?" Chilton tried to peer around Hannibal to see inside.

"What do you want with him?"

"The Ripper killed again last night. Jack Crawford wants us at the crime scene before they move the bodies."

Intriguing. "Come in then."

Chilton took off his scarf and eyed the crepes hungrily. "Sorry to interrupt your breakfast. If you'd wake Will up we'll be on our way."

"He isn't here, but I'm sure he'll arrive shortly. Make yourself comfortable."

"Who are the crepes for then?"

Hannibal pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth to school his expression. "Please, help yourself."

Will's breakfast disappeared into Chilton's masticating mouth in seconds.

“Mmm, I was always partial to mascarpone.” Chilton surveyed the decor. He picked up an issue of *Vogue Italia* from the coffee table and flipped through it. “Will doesn’t get on with many people. Odd I haven’t heard of you before.”

“We met at Heimlich's soiree,” Hannibal reminded him.

“Ah, yes. Well, thank you for taking him off my hands for a few days. He’s been quite a nuisance. My plumber says that somebody took a saw to my water main, and I can only imagine it was him. Not sure what I did to deserve that.”

“Who could hope to understand a mind like his?”

“Oh ho, caught onto that, have you? Has he shown you the first chapter of his thesis? Pure genius.”

Hannibal considered before saying on impulse, “I’d be interested in listening to the recordings of his interviews with Hobbs. Did you save them?”

“I did, but patient confidentiality and all that. They’re not much use either, if you want to know how Will did it. Reading his profile, you’d think Hobbs spilled his guts or gave a full confession, but no. They talked about hunting mostly, a little about his daughter and his job as a construction worker. Hobbs took a real shine to him. They could’ve been watching a football match over beers.”

So Hannibal was not the first serial killer to bask in the light of Will’s attention. Not without some bitterness, he imagined a world where he was locked away and Will came to peer through the bars of his plight. They could speak freely in that subterranean dungeon, a hopeless fantasy as long as they both walked free.

“Brains and beauty all in one package. It’s a shame he’s not seeing anyone. Unless…” Chilton glanced around at Hannibal’s floral arrangements. “You are that someone?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Oh, please. I’m old enough to recognize a fellow closet case. Does Will know?”

“If you’re implying that I’m a homosexual, Dr. Chilton, that’s not the case.”

Chilton winked. “I suppose we aren’t his type anyway. Don’t worry, I won’t tell him about you if you don’t tell him about me.”

This poularde was begging to be stuffed.

He continued his clucking. “I hope to write something about Will one day. *Empathetic Connections: One Mind Containing Multitudes*. Perhaps without the subtitle. Colons lose their novelty when overused. What do you think? Any study would have to be published posthumously, of course,” he added quickly.

“After his death, or yours?”

Chilton pursed his lips, but the front door opened before he could answer.

Hannibal shot to his feet in time to see Will enter the living room. His knit cap was edged with frost and his cheeks were wind-chafed, as if Zephyrus himself had blown him in and deposited him on the doorstep.

Will's face fell upon seeing Chilton. He cast an accusatory glare at Hannibal. "Missed me that bad?"

"The Ripper killed a family in Pittsburgh last night," Chilton said. "Jack wants us there in four hours."

"Tell Crawford I can't help him."

"I thought you'd say that. He told me to show you these. He faxed them over with the evidence files."

Will stalled by wiping his glasses on his shirt. When he reluctantly flipped the first page of the packet, he froze. It was a collection of photos from when the victims were alive, including school pictures of a young boy and girl, a polaroid of a pretty woman with curly blond hair kissing a man wearing a birthday hat, and a family portrait in which all four beamed, hugging their border collie. It was captioned "Shermans: Always Better Together, 1982." The rest of the packet were pages photocopied from a scrapbook.

Will put the packet down, leaving it open to a collage of the day the Shermans adopted the dog. The puppy wore a pink bow around its neck.

"This is obscene."

Chilton raised his hands. "Blame Jack, not me."

Will chewed his chapped lips until they started bleeding. "It's four hours to Pittsburgh?" He looked up at Hannibal. Something about Will's eyes, red-rimmed and forlorn, constricted his chest. *He doesn't want to be alone with Chilton.*

"I have the day off," Hannibal said. "Allow me to drive you there."

That ruffled Chilton's feathers. "That's ridiculous. Jack won't let some random person on the premises."

"He let you see Raspail, he'll let Hannibal see this one."

And so, Hannibal found himself driving while Will dozed off in the passenger seat. He raised the heat until Will stopped shivering, though the car became hot enough that Hannibal had to take off his coat. Apparently, Will's night outdoors hadn't been a restful one because he didn't wake until Hannibal took the key out of the ignition in Pittsburgh.

"Another member of the Graham entourage, I see." Crawford scowled.

Hannibal shook his hand. “Pleased to finally put a face to your name, Detective. I studied under Heimlich at Johns Hopkins. He can vouch for my character.”

“Then maybe you’ll be more useful than Chilton. Come on.”

The Shermans had lived and died in a two-story colonial house surrounded by dense woods. Their nearest neighbors were two hundred meters away on either side. A bolt cutter had been used to break open a padlock on the side entrance under the deck. The door had a dog flap in it.

“What happened to the dog?” Will asked.

Crawford flipped through a clipboard. “No sign of it.”

“Have your team call the local veterinarians to see if anyone came in with an injured border collie. Search the backyard for where the Shermans might have buried it.”

Police and FBI agents milled through the house, dusting and combing every surface. Will avoided looking at them, which was impossible because they were everywhere. He stared at the floor and became increasingly agitated until finally Hannibal pulled Crawford aside.

“Will doesn’t work well in crowds.”

Crawford looked like he was about to start shouting but contained himself. “Don’t touch anything. I’ll be in the backyard. Everyone, clear out!”

Hannibal followed Will’s progress through the empty home. The killer had shattered every mirror on the premises. Trails of blood on the carpet where he’d dragged the victims between rooms. Mr. Sherman and the kids were tucked into their beds, quilts soaked with blood and shards of mirror shoved in their eyes, but Mrs. Sherman was nowhere to be found.

When they reached the master bedroom, Will took off his glasses and hung them from a shirt button. He spent a great deal of time there, sometimes examining the blood spatters on the walls, sometimes mumbling under his breath with his eyes closed. He had sweat through his flannel in the car and now shivered violently.

Hannibal saw the crime scene through Will’s eyes, envisioned death the way he imagined Will would see it. The hot darkness of this killer’s mind enveloped him like a second skin. With arterial spray and fractured glass, deductive logic painted an image so vivid, he may as well be traveling through time.

Will pulled at his collar, and Hannibal scented traces of his anxiety and arousal. He breathed them in deeply.

Will’s associations came at the speed of light, while his value judgments followed at the pace of a responsive reading. The thought that he’d done the same thing with Boyle and Raspail—had seen Hannibal’s work with clear eyes, if only for a moment before the habitual horror set in—kindled some new emotion in Hannibal. If it weren’t so unsettling, he might have thought it was *reassurance.*

After Will took a few minutes in the kitchen to calm down, Hannibal escorted him to the backyard where they discovered Mrs. Sherman's fate. The killer had tied her naked body to a birch tree at the ankles, waist, and neck. Her hands were tied behind the trunk. Shards of mirror held her eyelids open, but, unlike the others, her pale skin was littered with gruesome bite and suck marks. A dozen arrows impaled her legs and torso—a ham-handed reference to Saint Sebastian.

"Her tongue was taken as a surgical trophy," Crawford read. "Arrows belonged to Mr. Sherman. Wounds were inflicted postmortem, same as with Jeremy Olmstead six years ago."

Will shook his head. "It's not the Ripper."

A curl of satisfaction warmed Hannibal's stomach. This hack would not be mistaken for him after all.

"Why not?" Crawford demanded.

"Just look at this," Will waved a hand at Mrs. Sherman in disapproval. "Biting? *Sucking?* There's a full hand spread on her neck. No doubt you'll find traces of semen and saliva, but worst of all: Mrs. Sherman as Saint Sebastian? It doesn't make sense and it's way too sloppy."

"Then how do you explain the similarities?"

"The killer is an avid fan of the Ripper. Probably got excited when he made the news the other day." Will walked around the birch tree, examining Mrs. Sherman from all sides. "He saw the picture of Olmstead leaked by the Tattler back in 1977, but he didn't understand his meaning. Olmstead wasn't Saint Sebastian. He was the Wound Man used in medical illustrations in the fourteenth century. He saw these arrows and decided to truss Mrs. Sherman up on a lark, an afterthought to the fun he had in the bedroom."

"How do you know the Ripper isn't toying with us? The mirrors might be some sort of metaphor."

"No." Will was firm, almost defensive. "The Ripper is a pure sadist with a random kill pattern, but he never displays his victims where they were murdered, nor does he indulge such base desires. Rather, with great planning and intention, he tailors the setting, costume, theme, everything to the desired message, creating divine aesthetic order from the disorder of life. Through the Ripper, swine are transformed into works of art. This killer had no vision. He just wanted Mrs. Sherman for her looks."

The competing reverence and venom in Will's voice was andantino grazioso, like sweet strains of cello. His words would echo through the Duomo di Firenze of Hannibal's memory palace as long as he lived.

Crawford raised his eyebrows. "Jesus, Graham."

Will laughed shakily. "Yeah, I know." He knelt and examined Mrs. Sherman's thigh. "Looks like talcum powder here. He took his gloves off. Bastard had to touch her."

“We dusted her from head to toe and didn’t find any prints.”

Will waved a hand before Mrs. Sherman’s face. “The mirror shards made it look like their eyes were moving, as if they were alive. He wanted an audience.” His fingertips came dangerously close to touching her cheek. “No, more than that. He—has never been with a living woman.”

“He may be disfigured or believe he is disfigured,” Hannibal suggested.

Will flinched. “The broken mirrors, yes. Dust her corneas. I think he touched her eyes.” He drifted away, sweaty and shaking, to explore the surrounding woods.

That left Hannibal alone with Crawford.

“You’re a doctor, I bet you have some experience with this sort of thing. How is Will holding up?”

“He’s as sane as I am, Detective.” Hannibal watched Will bend over to pick something up from the leaf litter. “The associations he makes can be disturbing, but they’re nowhere near as detrimental as the Tattler would have you believe.”

They were distracted from their conversation when Will hoisted himself into the branches of a pine. All heads in the backyard turned to watch as he climbed up thirty feet.

“That’s good to hear.” Crawford handed Hannibal his business card. “Call me if you ever catch Graham slipping.”

Hannibal tucked the card into his breast pocket. “You’ll be the first to know. In the meantime, I’m not sure how to approach this subject, but I’d like to ask you something.”

“What?”

“Will is neither an Academy trainee nor an intern at the BSU. You haven’t given him permission to write about your cases—or his disturbing associations—for his thesis. Nevertheless, he is devoting considerable time and energy to this.”

“What are you saying?”

“If you’re worried about Will’s stability, I think some remuneration would go a long way.”

“You’re suggesting I hire a graduate student as a consultant.”

“Will is planning to quit his program and end his association with you as soon as he finds alternative employment. You’re already consulting him. If you want to continue, I’d have him sign a contract.”

Will returned holding a soda can at the end of a stick. “Found this up the tree. The killer used the bolt cutter to chop a branch off for a better view of the house. He probably cased the joint for hours—had time to carve this in the bark.”

He handed Crawford a pencil relief of a symbol.

“That’s a character for the middle way in Confucianism,” Hannibal supplied. “Or the red dragon tile in mahjong.” So this pup was familiar with the watercolors of William Blake. Perhaps he was more cultured than his work suggested. Should he tell Will or see if he could make the connection himself?

“You two make quite the team,” Crawford said. “Graham, you’re wasted under Chilton. Ever think about signing up at the FBI Academy?”

“Not sure I would pass the screening procedures, sir.” Will shoved his glasses back on, hiding his eyes behind the rims. “Look for the nearest road on the other side of these woods. If he parked there and hiked in, maybe someone remembers seeing his vehicle. And let me know if the dog turns up.”

On their way back to the car, Will shook five tablets of Bufferin out of a bottle and swallowed them dry. Hannibal could only imagine the severity of one’s headache after weeks of untreated encephalitis. The engine heated the car quickly and Hannibal rolled down his sleeves to cool off. He allowed Will to nurse his temples in silence until they merged onto the interstate.

“How’s the head?”

“Getting a little crowded.”

“You were adamant about not aiding the Ripper investigation, yet you were eager to see this crime scene. Why?”

“I knew it wasn’t him back in Baltimore.”

“How?”

“Most crimes like this can be reduced to a male penetrative control issue. The Ripper—” Will’s voice was so hoarse his throat clicked. “Merits a higher level of scrutiny. He never tortured animals as a boy, like common psychopaths do. He doesn’t kill children if he can help it. Or dogs. It would be—inelegant. There’s a moral contrapasso to his murders they can’t satisfy.”

“Does that matter to you?”

“It matters because it makes it hard to keep things straight when I’m looking at his work. Catching the Ripper doesn’t feel like serving justice, it feels like gnawing at my own leg. It’s not as difficult with a killer like this one.” Will huffed. “Why I’m telling you all this, I don’t know.”

“How did you feel when you looked at Mrs. Sherman?”

“I felt sad and disgusted. Our avid fan felt like God.” Will furiously scratched at his head. “Killing is a relief of the pressure constantly building in him. Part of it is the desire for control, but it’s also the desire to love and be loved.”

“These are universal drives. The question is why they manifest as violence for him.”

“The question is how he chooses his victims,” Will snapped. “That’s the only way to catch him.”

“Do you think he’ll kill again?”

Will bent double. “What?”

Hannibal glanced over. “Are you feeling unwell?”

Will covered his mouth with a hand, breathing labored. “Sorry, would you stop looking at me?”

Hannibal kept his eyes on the highway and looked for the next exit. “Do you remember the grounding exercise I taught you?”

“It’s three pm, my name is…”

“Your name?” Hannibal glanced over again.

“*Don’t look at me*,” Will growled, before ripping Hannibal’s right hand off the wheel and sinking his teeth into Hannibal’s forearm.

The pain was intense. The car swerved as Hannibal pulled onto the exit ramp. It took effort to keep his muscles relaxed and not break Will’s nose with his elbow. With one hand, he turned onto an abandoned forest service road and parked.

“Will,” Hannibal said as gently as he could manage. “Let go.”

Will’s jaw shook with the tension in his masseter even as he sucked hard enough to raise Hannibal’s skin. Blood pooled around his lips before running down his chin. His eyelids fluttered closed as he moaned.

That wouldn’t do. Hannibal climbed over the center console and dragged them both out of the car. Will slipped on wet leaves and they both tumbled into the ditch on the side of the road, Hannibal landing on top. That knocked the wind out of Will enough to force his mouth open. He panted and shook violently, eyes rolling back into his head.

“That’s it, Will, very good. Will?”

Will didn’t answer, still shaking. He’d lost control of his shallow breaths. Hannibal felt his forehead and checked the whites of his eyes.

Will was having a mild seizure. Hannibal would have to wait for him to regain consciousness to test for stroke symptoms.

Hannibal lifted him off the cold ground to cradle him against his chest, feeling the spasmodic contractions as they ran through Will’s body. A drop of lacrimal fluid ran down Will’s cheek from prolonged exposure of his sclera to the crisp air. Hannibal licked it before he questioned

the impulse. It was as salty as any other tear, but the taste was striking combined with Will's sweat and Hannibal's own blood.

He pressed Will's head against his shoulder while he examined his bleeding forearm. Will had bitten clean through the dermis, just shy of piercing muscle. A dark purple bruise was developing at the center of the ring, identical to the marks that had been present on Mrs. Sherman. Hannibal had antiseptic in the car, but he wouldn't treat this wound. Part of him hoped that it would become infected and scar.

He tilted his head back and closed his eyes, tightening his grip on Will's hair. He wondered if this was the day Will would die.

A new hall opened up in the bowels of his memory palace. It was similar to his Garden of the Hesperides, but instead of an apple grove it contained golden fields crossed with sparkling rivers. It was Elysium, the paradise where Will would dwell after death to await Hannibal's arrival, where they would converse without pretense at last. There, he drafted the final details of his next tableau.

Treize à Table

Friday, September 30th, 1983

Will woke up with the sun, but Hannibal was nowhere to be found, probably at the hospital for once. He crept through the kitchen, feeling like he was trespassing in a church while the pastor was away. There was a container of quiche on the counter accompanied by a note:

Please eat. - H

He didn't remember arriving in Baltimore the previous evening and figured he fell asleep in the car. The thought of Hannibal carrying him to bed was ridiculous, so he supposed he'd been too tired to recall taking a shower and going to bed. If he was honest with himself, there were large gaps in his memory of the last few days. Whispers of the word "relapse" sounded in the back of his mind, but Will was talented at ignoring such warnings.

It was time to hunt for jobs. His inquiries at auto repair shops on Wednesday hadn't been successful so he'd try the docks along the Patapsco River today. They were busy with fishermen preparing to sail out into the bay. For some reason, Will was disturbed by their hive-like movement. They reminded him of worms wriggling at the bottom of a bait barrel. He tried to stay out of their way in his search for bulletin boards and help wanted signs.

"You looking for work?" A grizzled man called out, tossing rope up to a crewmate on a trawler.

"Yes, sir. I do boat repairs."

"I don't know if anyone needs a repairman, but we could always use more hands up in Alaska. Crab season opens in a couple weeks if you don't mind traveling to Dutch Harbor."

Will had heard about Alaskan fishing from his father. The mortality rate was high from rogue waves throwing crewmates overboard into the Bering Sea. That was where real fishermen went to test their mettle and make a fortune if they survived. No Ripper, no Shermans, and not a moment left alone with one's thoughts. It was tempting. He took the man's contact details before moving on.

That afternoon, Will sat at the kitchen island and poured over the case files faxed by Crawford. Across the counter, Hannibal was preparing for a dinner party he was throwing for the board of the BSO. It was another "academic half day" Hannibal claimed, so he was not needed at the hospital.

Will humored his fib, grateful for Hannibal's grounding presence. It eased the shooting pain in his head and allowed him to review the crime scene photos without getting lost. It was dangerous to look at them alone. Mrs. Sherman was waiting in the master bedroom in Pittsburg, ready for him. Her black curls spread on the comforter like a halo, his reflection in her eyes. *Do you see me now? Yes. Oh, do you feel me now? Yes…*

He banished the image, focusing on Hannibal instead. The man worked rhythmically, spreading paste over toasted bread, plating each one with a sprig of fresh sage. He handled the knife deftly, veins and tendons flexing elegantly. There was his sixth finger, working in perfect tandem with the rest. The sight was calming but did not help stave off his arousal.

Will cleared his throat and turned to the file. He pretended he was back working for the NOPD, briefing his partner on their latest assignment.

“They’ve dubbed him the Tooth Fairy in Quantico. He bit a hunk of cheddar at the Shermans’ and left a perfect dental impression for them to make a cast out of. His teeth are jagged and there’s a tailor’s notch in his left incisor. Like shark teeth.”

Hannibal looked over at the picture of the cast. “His bite is his calling card.”

“Along with his saliva, semen, and hair. Based on his hand spread, he’s roughly six feet tall. We know he’s blond, caucasian, right-handed, and very strong. They found fingerprints on Mrs. Sherman’s corneas and the soda can. This guy’s not trying to hide evidence.”

“He’s either confident you’ll never guess how he’s choosing his victims, or he’s delusional.”

“He’s bad with women, intensely misogynistic, and views himself as deformed, but he’s not delusional,” Will said with confidence. “He won’t be caught until he kills again and establishes a pattern.”

“A shy boy,” Hannibal said. “How can we bring him out of his shell?” He prepared to mince vegetables for soffritto and rolled up his sleeves. A gauze pad was stuck to his forearm with medical tape.

“What happened to your arm?”

“My butcher’s mutt is normally docile, but he attacked me today.”

“Sudden aggression can be a sign of illness. Did you get a rabies shot?”

“All my vaccinations are up to date, thank you, Will. Here, try the antipasto: crostini di fegatini.”

Hannibal hand-fed him while Will flipped through an itemized list of all the Sherman’s possessions.

“It’s good,” Will said. “What’s the paste?”

“Chicken liver. Tonight, I’m bringing Florence to Fell’s Point.”

“How many people are coming?” Will tried not to sound too disinterested.

“Eleven, including yourself.”

“Oh no, I’ll be making myself scarce.”

“But you’ve never tried my cuisine.” Hannibal saw Will’s confusion and amended, “I save my best work for four course meals.”

“I’ll embarrass you in front of your high society peers.”

“If my guests scorn a friend of mine, they’ll be an embarrassment to themselves and to me.”

Will didn’t know what to say to that, so he awkwardly returned to reading the photocopy of Mrs. Sherman’s diary. Though the Shermans had clearly afforded a comfortable lifestyle, Mrs. Sherman had still worried about pinching pennies where she could, darning socks and collecting cereal box coupons. Will guessed she’d grown up poor, as he had. Will found himself wishing he’d known her so that he could picture her alive instead of spread out on the bed. Horrified, he wondered if he was becoming as obsessed with Mrs. Sherman as the Tooth Fairy was. Their most damning similarity, after all, was their inability to get laid.

Hannibal dumped the soffritto into a terracotta pot to sauté then pulled out several kilos of what looked like mushroom but was clearly some type of bleached organ. It had alternating gill and honeycomb patterns.

“What is that?”

“Tripe. It’s chewy until it cooks down to a silken texture, delicious in soups.” Hannibal sliced off the end of a smaller, velvety stomach. The esophageal sphincter fit on the end of his thumb like a ring. He offered it to Will, who made a face. “You should try it. I think you’d be surprised.”

“Is it edible raw?”

“It won’t kill you.”

It was rubbery like calamari but with a mild beef flavor. Will gave Hannibal the satisfaction of observing him savor its mouthfeel before he swallowed. Hannibal’s pleasure radiated through their eye contact. It occurred to him that one of the man’s favorite pastimes was watching people eat his cooking.

Ladon curled in his belly. Will would need an antacid later.

“Speaking of abdominal organs, Crawford still isn’t convinced that the Ripper and the Tooth Fairy are different killers. Look, he had someone at Behavioral Science write a report of the similarities between Raspail, Olmstead, and Mrs. Sherman.”

“Are you convinced?”

“By Crawford’s wishful thinking? Of course not.” He yawned. The sun was not yet low on the horizon and Will was already tired. His entire musculoskeletal system ached.

Hannibal noticed him rubbing his shoulders and neck. “Are your headaches worsening?”

“Yeah. Think I should see a doctor?” Will grimaced. He was leery of the healthcare system in general ever since his convalescence in New Orleans. He’d prefer never to step foot in a

hospital again.

“You’re seeing one right now. In my professional opinion, you need bed rest and an analgesic.”

Hannibal put away the evidence folder, helped Will to the living room couch, and went upstairs to retrieve a dark bottle of paregoric. Will vaguely recognized the label and had a flashback to his childhood as Hannibal poured a tablespoon of the brown syrup.

“A cough medicine I favor,” Hannibal explained as he fed Will the spoonful. It tasted like licorice.

“I’ve been sleeping so much lately,” Will complained, but he didn’t resist when Hannibal lifted his legs onto the couch and covered him with a blanket. The drum of Hannibal’s cleaver on the cutting board and the simmer of tripe and soffritto lulled him to sleep.

He awoke to a transformed world. Gone was his headache along with every other bodily pain. There was a tremendous pressure in his skull, like someone was pumping helium into it, but a wave of euphoria buoyed him upright nonetheless.

The living room had undergone a lavish makeover, adorned with candelabras and lilies of crimson and ivory. More lilies hung from the dining room chandelier. In the kitchen, a Sous-chef whisked ricotta and icing sugar while Hannibal plated soup.

Chilton perched on the loveseat across from him, sipping an aperitivo and trying to look at ease between two massive arrangements of lilies. Will found this so funny he couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“Hannibal invited *you*?”

“Not quite,” Chilton simpered. “Crawford sent me to inform you that they used a methane probe in the Shermans’ backyard. They found the dog.”

“Congratulations to them. I take it she’s dead.”

“Quite. Its back was broken.”

Will tried to remember why he had been so interested in the dog in the first place. “Thanks for the update. Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

“Don’t be rude, Will. There’s always room for one more at my table,” Hannibal said, handing him a drink. It smelled of orange and vanilla. “Dr. Chilton, excuse us. I must introduce Will to his attire for the evening.”

Chilton gave them a knowing look as Hannibal whisked him upstairs. Will tried to parse what it could mean and realized both his eidetic memory and empathy were impaired. Whatever was in that cough syrup, Will could get used to it.

A suit was laid out on the bed, very similar to the one Hannibal was wearing.

“I had one of mine tailored.”

Will didn’t need to look at Hannibal’s face to tell he was lying. He was no sartorial expert, but even he knew that the cut of the suit was too fine to have been taken in. Thinking about its cost made Will dizzy.

“This is too much. How about I clear out for the evening, and Chilton can take my spot?”

Hannibal tsked. “I’m not leaving until you try it on.”

With uncertain hands, Will stripped to his underclothes and put on the ensemble. Hannibal helped him with his tie and cufflinks, then opened a box. It contained a white flower with petals stained scarlet around the edges. The Tooth Fairy’s bite marks on Mrs. Sherman came to mind.

Will winced, already tugging at his necktie to loosen it. “Please don’t make me wear a corsage.”

“It’s a boutonniere,” Hannibal corrected, affixing it to Will’s lapel. “As my guest of honor, you will wear Il Giglio Fiorentino, an iris born on the shores of the Arno River and often mistaken for a lily.”

“I guess it’ll help me blend into the decor.” The flower made him feel like a circus clown. He imagined water squirting from its center.

Before Will could sneak away, Hannibal’s guests began to filter in. He didn’t recognize anyone besides Chilton and Hannibal’s supervisor, Dr. Du Maurier. There was much chatter about the BSO’s performance last Friday as they found their seats. Their noise was muffled and the colors of their expensive clothing were dull and hazy. Hannibal moved swanlike through the herd, pouring wine and eliciting laughter. He guided Will to the chair directly to the right of his own seat at the head of the table. Will anchored himself there, afraid he might float away.

As the antipasto was served, the man on Will’s other side spoke up. “You can’t fool me, Hannibal. I recognize a reference to la Sala dei Gigli when I see it. My wife and I went to Florence for our honeymoon.”

“Well done, John,” Hannibal said. “I couldn’t bring you all to the Palazzo Vecchio, so I brought the Palazzo Vecchio here. I hope you enjoy the taste of Tuscany.” He raised his aperitivo in a toast.

Hannibal’s form blurred and became luminous, like stained glass lit by the sun. Will blinked rapidly, but the glow persisted. He attributed the hallucination to a strange interaction between the cough syrup and alcohol and continued to be distracted by it until a waiter brought out the first course: trippa alla fiorentina.

Will examined the collection of silverware before him and wondered which one was for soup.

“I feel a little guilty enjoying such a lovely evening when one of our musicians passed so recently,” one woman said. Murmurs of “poor fellow” went down the table.

“Shall I confess something wicked?” John asked. “I can’t help feeling just the tiniest bit, well, relieved. It sounds awful, I know, but—let’s face it—so did the man’s playing.”

Nervous titters, then the table moved on to lighter conversation.

John turned to Will. “And how are you related to our host?”

Will was vague on that detail himself, but he ventured a guess. “I’m his roommate.”

He laughed as if Will had told a joke. “Ever the eccentric, Hannibal. Where did he pick you up?”

“Will is a special consultant for the FBI,” Hannibal said, still glowing like an angel. “I’m providing him lodging while he investigates.”

“Why, I would never have guessed! Ah, you’ll want to use this spoon, not that one. There you go. Now, have you ever been to Italy, Will? No? Then you’ll be interested to hear about la Sala dei Gigli.” John went on at length about Ghirlandaio, Donatello, and the Medici while Will stared at his lopsided bowtie. “Perhaps Hannibal will take you there one day. Now, what is it you do for the FBI?”

Will smiled, genuinely amused by the question. “I’m working on Raspail’s case.”

John was taken aback for a moment but pressed on. “With a bright young man like you on the job, I’m sure they’ll catch the Ripper in no time. Forgive my callousness, but I would ask around the wharf. Benjamin was *fond* of sailors.”

“I’ll let the Bureau know.”

“In the meantime, you should allow me to introduce you to my barber. I understand detectives are above that sort of thing, but you’re representing a federal agency. Unless you mean to grow a mullet?”

Will’s hair had been creeping over his ears for the last few weeks, but he hadn’t thought much of it.

Across the table, Chilton piped up. “Will is an academic. Always has his nose in a book and his head in the clouds.” That earned him many questions about his involvement with the case, which he was more than happy to answer.

“I just realized,” a woman said. “We’re treize à table. That’s very unlucky.”

“Don’t say that! One of us could be next!”

***

The rest of the dinner passed smoothly. Hannibal couldn't have been more pleased with the Sous-chef's preparation of the zuccotto which was served as dolce. Chilton provided much entertainment. As he ate, Hannibal mentally recited the man's 1977 psychosexual analysis on the Chesapeake Ripper.

Will did not eat much, but that wasn't surprising. Nausea and loss of appetite were side effects of large doses of morphine, but so was bliss. Though his conversation was dull that evening, his appearance was not. Will's smile made its first appearance in his presence, a violent flash of teeth bestowed upon a member of the glitterati who he disdained. Gaiety sketched nascent crow's feet around his eyes in a most appealing manner. He filled out his suit nicely and lounged with grace, candlelight accenting the bloody iris on his chest. He did not blend into the decor, as he had suggested earlier. Far from it.

Not many of his guests were brave enough to bridge the gap between beau monde and bourgeois, and few that dared could handle Will's brand of dry humor. They were intimidated by what he'd seen of Raspail—especially considering his unnatural levity. They preferred to talk at him than have a true dialogue. When dolce was finished, they failed to capture Will's attention, so he drifted through the vases of lilies and up the stairs.

After the majority of the guests had left, Hannibal went to check on Will, but he wasn't in the bedroom or bathroom. Finger resting on the scalpel in his pocket, Hannibal went upstairs to his study. It was empty as well.

He checked the door beyond his desk and was relieved to find it still locked.

Will sat on the balcony, head hung forward, obscured in shadow, and most certainly feeling the effects of the Rohypnol in his last glass of wine. His necktie hung like a scarf from his unbuttoned collar.

Bedelia sat beside him, looking out at the Patapsco River. Drops of rain indicated that the weather was soon to shift.

Hannibal joined them.

"He's unconscious," Bedelia said. "What did you give him?"

"Flunitrazepam and morphine. Did you enjoy your meal?"

"It was delicious as always. Hannibal, what are you doing with this man?"

That was a good question. "Nothing untoward."

"You've never been interested in making friends before."

Bedelia may have seen past his person suit, but she did not have the capacity to appreciate the game he played with Will. "I'm not sure if friendship is my goal."

"Not everyone's idea of friendship is the same. Apparently, yours involves one of the parties being medicated. He works for the FBI. You are flying ever closer to the sun, Hannibal."

“You needn’t worry. I can end our connection at any moment.”

“Can you?” Bedelia unbuttoned the iris from Will’s lapel and handed it to Hannibal. “It seems you’ve already crowned him nobility. You must force yourself to take a step back.”

Hannibal sniffed the flower. Three hours out of its box, it sustained its earthy ground notes while accruing a hint of Will’s musk. The iron tang of blood collected from the bite wound on his forearm was reminiscent of yesterday’s teardrop. He tucked the boutonniere into his breast pocket. It would press nicely in his copy of Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories*.

“I’m just intrigued.”

“Intrigued obsessively. Whatever you’re doing with Will Graham, stop it.”

The raindrops became more frequent as the wind picked up. Will stirred.

“Thank you. I’ll consider your advice.”

She was gone before Will woke up. Fat drops of rain splattered on his face and off the satin of his suit. When he opened his eyes, they were unfocused, but he grinned from ear to ear. Hannibal returned his smile and eased off Will’s glasses to better see his crow’s feet. He reflected that the administration of narcotics had the potential to become as addictive as their consumption.

“I hope you keep your cough syrup locked up. That stuff is incredible,” Will slurred.

Hannibal lifted him by his armpits and helped him into the study. “My dear Will, you may have as much of my medicine as you desire.”

***

Dolarhyde couldn’t afford to keep his van parked outside the Ripper’s townhouse forever—the license plate was too easily traced—so he’d taken to pretending to smoke across the street. He watched the motion of bodies in the windows from behind a tree. A tan bomber jacket and baseball hat did little to conceal his six-foot-two bodybuilder’s physique. He knew he made an odd sight and would be noticed, especially as it began to rain.

So he was when the Ripper opened his front door for the last guest to leave. He said his farewells, then looked straight at Dolarhyde, expressionless. He left the door open a crack as he turned back inside. Dolarhyde waited a minute before he slipped his unlit cigarette back in its pack and followed.

This was only the second home he’d been in besides his own. The first had been the Shermans’. He trailed gloved fingers over the coats in the foyer. His shoes left wet footprints on the carpet runner as he climbed the stairs. The remains of the party were scattered throughout the living and dining rooms on the second floor, which was practically bursting with flowers. So occupied, so alive.

The bedrooms on the third floor were empty, but how exciting it was to see where the Ripper—and now Graham—slept at night. He avoided the many bathrooms and the accompanying

impulse to break the mirrors therein.

Up and up he climbed, until he reached the fourth floor: a study filled with mementos from worldly travels. A wooden executive desk guarded a door outfitted with a deadbolt lock. Dolarhyde had never seen a light turn on in that particular room.

The Ripper attended to Graham on a couch in the center of the study. Graham was in a sorry state, eyes glazed and head lolling. The Ripper held his chin steady to wipe his drool with a silk pocket square.

Dolarhyde sat on the couch opposite them. "What—happened to him?" he asked instead of *what's wrong with him*, to avoid the sibilant "s" and the fricative "th."

"Will is on a journey running parallel to ours. Don't worry about him, he won't remember tonight's conversation." The Ripper folded the handkerchief back into his pocket. "Let's talk about you. You've done some excellent work in Pittsburgh."

"You honor me."

"If you have pictures, I'd love to see them."

"I brought this." From his pocket Dolarhyde pulled a ziploc bag containing Mrs. Sherman's tongue, barely visible through all the blood.

"How thoughtful of you."

The Ripper held Graham's wrist as if he was taking his pulse, but he wasn't timing it with a watch. Meanwhile, Graham found Dolarhyde's face and latched onto it. Head tilted forward, he maintained aggressive eye contact. Sitting so close and practically holding hands in their matching suits, they were like a couple of queers. Dolarhyde's attention flicked between the two of them, trying to assess their dynamic. Was Graham the Ripper's pet or was the Ripper Graham's nursemaid?

He tried to remember what he'd come here to say.

"Can I offer you some wine?"

"I don't drink."

"Some cake then? There's plenty left over in the ice box."

Dolarhyde nodded. The Ripper's footsteps descended two flights of stairs to the kitchen.

He needed to kill Graham before he could show the Red Dragon to the Ripper. This was his chance to case the house, but he was too unnerved by Graham's penetrating gaze.

"What are you looking at?"

Graham didn't answer. Something was shifting in him. He rolled his shoulders and crawled onto the couch next to Dolarhyde, more beast than man. Outside, the heavens opened and

began to downpour. Graham leaned closer. Their foreheads were inches apart, eyes locked. Dolarhyde could distinguish his eyelashes, hear the creak of his joints over the roll of thunder in the distance.

Graham bit Dolarhyde's neck.

He dared attack the Dragon? Incensed, Dolarhyde yanked at Graham's hair, but that only increased the pain. A punch to the temple loosened Graham's jaw and knocked his head back, then Dolarhyde wrenched him to the side and jerked his collar down. Human teeth would suffice for this miserable creature.

Instead of an Adam's apple, his teeth met the satin of a clothed forearm. The Ripper tore Graham away from Dolarhyde and set him down on the couch.

"We can't leave any noticeable marks."

Graham ran his tongue over his bloody teeth and swallowed. "Not fair. He didn't get to taste mine."

The Ripper smiled as if a favorite pupil had said something particularly insightful. He fetched a towel to clean Graham's face before Dolarhyde's blood could stain his shirt, then sat primly on the couch next to him, legs crossed. Their bodies touched from thigh to shoulder. He snaked an arm around Graham to cover his eyes and prevent his head from lolling. The intimacy of the touch made Dolarhyde's skin crawl.

"I beg your pardon. Eye contact agitates him."

Who was this man, bowing and scraping before an invalid, fond of a rabid dog, a purulent slug? Certainly not the Ripper Dolarhyde had envisioned. He was as ignorant as the others, bound by the same mortal chains. But it didn't matter. He would witness true greatness in time.

"Why haven't you killed him?" Dolarhyde growled.

"Professional curiosity. Will is the rare type that can understand us."

"A living vessel?" Dolarhyde lisped the sibilant "s".

What had the Tattler said? *He could assume the identity of a murderer*. The pain in Dolarhyde's neck subsided as he considered. Graham had tasted the Dragon's blood. It was already changing his body. Would he be a new host? Surely the Dragon wouldn't replace him with this sliver of a man.

"Can you feel Him?" Dolarhyde asked experimentally.

"Yes," Graham hissed. "I feel Him." The tendons of his pale throat strained as he nuzzled into the Ripper's hand, still blinded. He had an erection, overwhelmed by the Red Dragon's sexual power.

Dolarhyde, who would normally be flustered by such wanton indecency, was sick with jealousy. He wanted to uncover Graham's eyes to see if the Red Dragon was there staring back at him. At the same time, he liked that Graham couldn't see. He wanted to take him to his van and—he didn't know what. He supposed he wanted to kill him.

"This has been most edifying," the Ripper said. "I'm glad you got to meet each other before Will's death."

"Death?"

"He has autoimmune encephalitis. Without treatment, patients rarely last past two months."

"If he will die anyway, give him to me."

"Why, what do you propose to do with him?"

"I will make an example of him. All will know my glory."

The Ripper considered. "No doubt they will, but you'll have to find another sacrifice. I have plans for this one."

Dolarhyde was indignant. "But he will die."

"We all must make the most of our brief time on earth. I'll make the most of Will, and his time on this earth will be brief, I assure you. Your cake is melting, by the way."

Dolarhyde was not stupid enough to touch the food.

The Ripper released Graham's face as he stood to escort Dolarhyde to the foyer. Dolarhyde was inexplicably relieved when the Ripper stepped away from the man. He cast a glance back at the couch before descending the stairs, meeting Graham's eyes once more. They were languid and glinting in the dim light.

Graham smiled.

Stomach somersaulting, Dolarhyde reached into his pocket and twisted the souvenir Graham had given him during their short fight: a lock of his hair.

The Ripper's Apprentice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, October 1st, 1983

Will returned to the Gunpowder at dawn, as light on his feet as one of his bobbers. The birdcalls and the gurgling of the creek were extraordinarily loud. The sunrise was so vibrant with shades of peach and coral that it turned the yellow birches tangerine. The citrus colors erupted with fiery brilliance, almost painful to look at. He felt like this was the first time he had ever been truly awake. It was almost alarming.

“Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning,” he mumbled.

The bluegills had crushed his Elk Hair Caddis fly last week and he wasn’t comfortable steaming it flat in Hannibal’s pristine kitchen, so he’d brought out a Woolly Worm instead. It wasn’t a standard Woolly Worm, however. He’d gotten more bites after he started tying them differently in August, but he kept the source of the information in a remote part of his mind that he rarely accessed. As he ran a finger over the fly’s hackle, his mental forts crumbled, and he was swept away by the memory.

He was underground at the BSHCI, sitting in a folding chair under the fluorescent lights at the end of the cell block. A tape recorder hummed beside him, listening to his interview with Garret Jacob Hobbs.

Hobbs was animated. He stood inches from the bars of his cell and rambled with the enthusiasm middle-aged men often had when questioned about themselves.

“One day I said to myself, a tail would add some swimming movement to this thing, even if fished dead-drift. So I added a bit of marabou at the end to make it look like a dobsonfly larva and what do you know—I caught more smallmouth bass that summer than ever before. I call it the Woolly Bugger.”

“That’s incredible, Mr. Hobbs. I’ll have to try it myself sometime.” Will tried not to make it obvious as he glanced at the clock. It was three pm.

“Let me know how it works for you.”

Will reached down and shut off the tape recorder. “That’s the end of the hour. Thanks for your cooperation. I’m indebted to you, truly.”

“Anytime, Will. When are you visiting next?”

Will knew Hobbs eagerly anticipated their weekly interviews. Since he’d responded to the first one so well, Chilton had convinced Will to come back for a second and third. In those three weeks, Hobbs had become extremely attached. Will wasn’t a replacement for his

daughter, but he was the closest thing to it. Perhaps Hobbs considered him the son he never had. But Will had everything he needed to write his profile now.

“I’m sorry, this was our last chat.”

Hobbs wilted. “Really? You can’t come again?”

Will tried to disentangle himself from Hobbs’s psyche, but it was difficult after mirroring him for an hour straight. Hobbs’s anxiety leaked in. Will was leaving him. It was like Abigail all over again. *Like a thin white bird blown out of the northern seas, he drags and beats along the fence perpetually, seeking release from me, from the bond of my love which creeps up, needing his happiness, whilst he in displeasure retreats…*

“I’m sorry,” Will repeated.

Hobbs reached a hand through the bars of his cell. “One shake, then, to say goodbye?”

Will stepped up to the yellow line on the floor. He tried to recall if he’d ever shared a handshake with his own father, who’d been dead for a decade. He didn’t think he had. His father’s face flickered over Hobbs’s, one tanned ruddy from years of Gulf Coast sun, the other pale from hunting in the Minnesota woods. He could have that reassurance here; he could lean against that pillar of strength once again if he wanted.

The question was how likely Hobbs was to kill him.

It wouldn’t take much strength for him to pull Will against the bars and snap his neck. Will sat with the image, rolling it around his mouth like tobacco. He held the kitchen knife and slit Abigail’s throat. Then he felt the grip of Hobbs’s arm against his chest and the knife slashed across his own neck. There, spraying arterial blood onto the linoleum floor, Will’s fighting spirit faded, and he became one with Hobbs. Peace at last.

He stepped back from the yellow line. Tears pricked at his eyes.

“You know I can’t do that, Mr. Hobbs.”

“Don’t do this, Will.” Hobbs’s face twisted in unspeakable pain as his guilt rose again. For the rest of his life, his failure to honor every part of Abigail would torture him. Will was the only thing that could distract him from the unbearable truth: he had murdered his daughter.

“Don’t go,” he said as Will picked up the tape recorder. “Please,” he wailed as Will walked down the corridor. The other inmates hissed obscenities and laughed as Hobbs banged at his cell walls. “Will! WILL!”

Will stood up from his tackle box and waded into the stream. The ripples reflected the pink sky like floating cherry blossoms. He hefted his rod with difficulty, right hand numb from cold. In fact, numbness was spreading through the entire right side of his body.

A twig cracked behind him. He whipped around, expecting the black dragon Ladon to be stalking him once more, but he saw nothing.

“I know you’re there,” Will called.

Silence.

“Come on, I’m not scared of you. You don’t have to hide.”

Tentatively but with practiced grace, a tall figure emerged from the underbrush. Will didn’t recognize the man until he realized it was Hobbs dressed in a bomber jacket and jeans instead of his navy prison jumpsuit. A complex series of emotions ran through him: bewilderment, guilt, a thrill of fear, then, finally, calm. Hobbs was almost wholesome compared to the Tooth Fairy. Their reunion was a bittersweet comfort, despite the odd location for it.

Smiling, he jogged up to Hobbs and held out the fly. “Recognize this?”

Hobbs was more interested in Will’s face than the fly. “No.”

“Really?” Will was the slightest bit crestfallen. “It’s your Woolly Bugger. I added the marabou like you suggested. Works real well. Want to try?”

Hobbs looked confused.

Poor guy, Will thought. He must have forgotten how to fish in prison. He held the rod handle out to Hobbs until he took it, then dragged him to the water’s edge. Hobbs wasn’t wearing waders, so they stood on the bank.

“Before casting, I sometimes name the bait on my hook after somebody I cherished. Superstition goes, if the person you name it after cherished you, you’ll catch the fish.” Will looked at Hobbs sheepishly. Maybe this was too sappy for a conversation between men. “Why don’t you name this one, since you taught me the pattern?”

Hobbs thought for a moment, unsmiling. Will expected him to name it Abigail, but he just shook his head. His voice rumbled, speech slow and halting. “What would you name it?”

Late nights in the patrol car. Two fingers of whiskey on his whitewashed porch. Crickets chirping as fireflies danced at the edge of the marsh. Smoke curled between blunt fingers and blew through a whiskered smile. “Incredible. How did you know it was him?” Will slammed the door shut on the memory before the man’s face—or the hole where his face once was—could appear. Another room he never entered.

“I don’t have anyone either. Go ahead and cast.”

Hobbs tried, but the fly didn’t get very far.

“Feel the weight of the line drawing the rod back before shooting it forward,” Will suggested. “Allow the rod to bend while building power. Think of it like a bow.”

His next attempt went ten meters further.

“Well done.” He clapped Hobbs on the back, who startled as if hit.

Will stared at him while he held the rod. Hobbs was so unsure of himself, so different from the man he'd spoken to at the BSHCI. He kept peeking at Will from the corner of his eye, pretending to be focused on the line. Ten minutes passed until Hobbs got a bite. With impressive strength, he had no issue reeling it in. It was a rainbow trout, twelve inches long.

"You're kidding. I've been trying for one of these for weeks and you swoop in out of nowhere and catch one?"

Hobbs struggled to contain the flopping fish. Will laughed, grabbing his hunting knife to help him.

At his approach, Hobbs dropped the fish and stepped back, eyes wide. The rod clattered against the rocks.

"What, the knife? I'm just cutting the line." Will stooped to unhook the trout's lip, then grabbed a smooth river stone, and bashed it just above the eyes where its brain was. It stopped flopping, stunned. He slit its main artery below its gills and let it gush lifeblood onto the wet pebbles.

Hobbs grunted, staring at the blood.

Will wiped the knife clean. "I've been thinking about what you said last time we met."

"What did I–say?" Hobbs lisped the "s."

"You asked me for a handshake, but I can do you one better."

Hobbs fidgeted nervously as he approached.

"Relax, I'm not gonna kill you." Amused, Will sheathed the knife, then wrapped his arms around Hobbs in a hug, tucking his face into Hobbs's shoulder. He had more muscle than Will remembered but shook like a leaf, as if he really was scared that Will would kill him—or that he would kill Will.

Like a stray dog accepting its new owner, Hobbs hesitantly brought his hands up to Will's back. Will was surprised by how much the sign of trust affected him. Failing to suppress the surge of alien emotion, he cried against Hobbs's chest, who stood stock still. Will tried to be quiet but couldn't repress his wet sniffling. A minute later, he stepped back and wiped at his eyes with his sleeve. He laughed, feeling more than a little unhinged. None of this was real, he reminded himself, so there was no point in being embarrassed.

"Sorry, I don't know what that was. Do you want your trout?"

Hobbs shook his head. Will wiped some snot from his nose. They stared at each other awkwardly.

"Normally my hallucinations don't stick around this long."

"Do you want me to go?"

“Not really.”

Will double bagged the trout, which hadn’t bled out completely yet, packed his tackle box, and tramped up the deer trail toward the main road. Hobbs followed at a distance like a lost puppy. Will imagined him as a fly attached to the end of his line, fighting the drag of the stream current. It was as if he could mend his rod upstream or downstream to change Hobbs’s presentation. How odd to feel like he had control over his delusions.

At his truck, Will missed the lock on the passenger door with the key and scraped a line in the paint. He flexed his right hand, which was still numb along with the entire right side of his body and tried again. It was difficult, but he managed to unlock it eventually.

“Are you alright?” Hobbs asked.

“I don’t think so. Damn, I could use a smoke.”

Hobbs pulled out a full pack of cigarettes and offered him one. Will turned the white stick in his hand. It felt remarkably real for a hallucination. Hobbs held up a light and when Will sucked it in, real smoke filled his lungs. It had been so long since his last one, Will could taste the bitterness and chemicals. He coughed.

“Why don’t you—go to the doctor?” Hobbs asked.

“If I set foot in a hospital I might never come out. You should understand that better than anyone.”

“But you’re dying.”

Will flinched, shocked that his subconscious could acknowledge this truth. His conscious mind shied away from it before it could sink in.

“Everybody’s dying. Take care, Mr. Hobbs.”

Will took a drag of the cigarette and looked in the rear-view mirror as he drove away. Hobbs remained standing on the side of the road, watching Will’s truck until he turned a corner and lost sight of him.

In the periodicals room at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Will stared at the bright red F Lounds had scrawled over Julie Pierce’s essay. Fury shook through him, at Lounds for writing that damn article, at Chilton for not noticing or caring that Lounds had sold him to the Tattler, and at himself for not being able to focus on these stupid essays. His office hours were on Monday, and Pierce would be there asking for her grade.

He tried to mark them, but before he knew it he was reading about mahjong and Confucianism. Not that it helped. None of the information struck him as relevant to the Tooth Fairy case. He thought of the border collie with the broken back and wondered if he should tell Crawford to put out a press release warning people that the Tooth Fairy was compelled to kill pets during the day before returning at night. He wondered if that would even help or just result in copycat pet murder. Better to notify veterinarians state-wide, but what was the point?

Who brought their dead pet to the vet? When the library closed, he was exhausted with little to show for it.

Hannibal was reading in the living room when Will returned to Fell's Point. His hair had fallen from its tidy sweep after his day in the operating room, but he still wore a white button-up and slacks. A vision of Hannibal's future with Alana hit him: she could come home from work and be treated to this handsome sight every day if she wanted. Hannibal, wearing his velvet housecoat and argyle socks. Hannibal, writing notes in elegant cursive with dexterous surgeon's hands. Hannibal, rising from the armchair with a drowsy smile and crossing the sea of lilies to join Will in the kitchen.

"Have you eaten yet?" Will asked, placing a cooler on the counter.

"I haven't. What have you brought me?"

Will pulled out the rainbow trout, rinsed it in the sink, and placed it on a cutting board.

"Beautiful fish. Did you catch it yourself?"

Will almost said no before he stopped himself. He didn't want to explain that morning's encounter with Hobbs, but he felt guilty claiming a catch that wasn't his. "I suppose I did. How about I make dinner for once? It won't be as good as your cooking, but I've made my dad's trout meunière a thousand times so it should be halfway decent."

Hannibal watched Will scale and gut the fish. "I didn't know you smoked."

It must have gotten into his sweater during the car ride. Will wondered how bad he smelled. "I don't anymore. Stopped when I moved out east." More accurately, he'd stopped during his extended hospital stay in New Orleans.

"Did you meet with anyone today?"

Will paused. "I ran into an old friend."

"Who?"

"A guy from university." He hated to lie. Luckily Hannibal didn't pursue the topic further.

Will stared at the trout, now headless and portioned into symmetrical filets. For the life of him, he couldn't remember his father's recipe. A litany of possible ingredients raced through his mind, but he couldn't make sense of them. His blood pressure spiked, and he could feel his heartbeat in his head.

"I forgot the recipe," he choked out. "I made this just last month. How could I forget?"

Hannibal was already tying an apron around his waist. He pried the knife from Will's hand and set it on the counter. "My recipe may differ from your father's, but I've made meunière many times. Why don't you take a seat?"

With capable efficiency, Hannibal rubbed seasoning into the filets before whisking milk and eggs in a bowl. Will tried to take comfort in his solid presence, but the pounding in his head was too loud to ignore. Blood thundered like a herd of wild horses stampeding through his retromandibular veins.

“I find the trout to be a very Nietzschean fish. Trials of its wild existence find their way into the flavor of the flesh.” He glanced up at Will. “Tell me about your father.”

What was there to say? His father had been present at least, unlike his mother, and then he’d died. He’d been a brawler but not a drunkard. They’d rarely spoken, Will understanding what needed to be understood with a glance at his father’s closed face, his father recoiling from his peculiarities. Will didn’t resent him—how could he, when everyone else flinched away as well? He owed everything to the man, up to and including the paltry sum of money he’d inherited and put toward a bachelor’s degree in Chicago—an improbable turn in his life he couldn’t have afforded without his father’s demise.

“He was violent, but not toward me.” The face of Garret Jacob Hobbs swam into focus before Will could quash it.

“Did he understand your ability?”

“I never expected him to.”

Hannibal dredged the filets in flour before laying them to fry in the skillet. “It can be difficult to forgive loved ones for leaving when they pass, often more so when they wronged you in life. Do you miss him, despite his flaws?”

“I never saw them as flaws. I love him, along with everything he entailed, even now.”

He met Hannibal’s burgundy eyes over the sink, expecting derision at the confession but finding something akin to admiration. The warmth in his gaze triggered something in Will, who was already on the verge of tachycardia. An animal flush of physicality, an overpowering desire to press his chest against bare skin. Klaxon alarms sounded as he imagined enacting upon Hannibal’s mouth sins more profane than any he had ever previously conceived. *What the hell? What are you thinking?*

Will tore his eyes away from Hannibal’s and blinked. They were sitting in the dining room. Battered fish lay over a bed of lettuce, covered in steaming brown sauce. It looked just like his father had always made it, but the smell of butter and green onion made him gag. It was reminiscent of the juice that accumulated at the bottom of trash cans. The thought of eating it was so disgusting he wondered for a moment if Hannibal was trying to poison him. He pushed the dish back, covered his mouth, and tried to will away his erection.

“I can’t eat this.”

“Is it not to your liking?” Hannibal was already halfway through his meal, innocent to Will’s salacious thoughts. Everything about the man, from the quirk of his eyebrows to the way he held his fork, incited unwarranted, savage hunger.

You're slipping, Graham. They're going to lock you away again.

"I'm just not hungry. Excuse me."

"Wait a moment. Drink this." Hannibal retrieved a glass of water and a white pill. "For your headache."

Will reached for them—anything to get out of the room as quickly as possible—but Hannibal held the pill up to hand feed him. Moaning internally, Will let him push it past his lips and onto his tongue. It took a great deal of self-control not to suck on his fingers. *What the hell what the hell what the hell.*

He swallowed the pill. "Thanks."

He fled the table to his room where his shameful excitement would not abate. He laid on the bed and resorted to using his hand. Murky images bloomed, beyond conscious comprehension: a brush of hands, a weight holding him down, the slide of eels swimming upstream. When he came it was like it was ripped out of him.

He panted in the aftermath, wetness dripping down his upper lip. He brought his hand up to his mouth and when he pulled it away it was covered in blood. A nosebleed. Before he could clean himself up, he blacked out.

Sunday, October 2nd, 1983

The next morning, Will opened the front door to an ominous sight. Crawford leaned against his car, grim-faced as ever.

"Another body dropped. You'll want to see this one."

Will immediately thought of Alana. "Why?"

Crawford glanced at a group of people approaching them on the sidewalk, shook his head, and opened his passenger door for Will.

A sinking feeling started in Will's stomach when Crawford took the highway exit for Roland Park. In total, it was only a sixteen-minute drive to the crime scene: an arboretum. They passed a group of policemen guarding a wrought-iron gate and drove up a winding driveway lined with ornamental boxwoods.

Crawford briefed him as they ducked under caution tape to enter an Italianate mansion. "One of the tour guides discovered the body this morning an hour before opening. Victim was named Dennis Dacre, age twenty-seven, last seen leaving work on Friday. He was a horticulturalist for the arboretum greenhouses, supplied flowers to the Baltimore Conservancy and some of the city parks. Everybody, clear out! Except you, Katz."

A woman with bright robin's eyes shook Will's hand and introduced herself as Beverly. She followed them into a room made light and airy by an abundance of French doors that allowed

the red Japanese maples outside to serve as a type of living wallpaper. It was the kind of venue where a newlywed couple might take wedding photos.

Immediately Will could tell it was the Ripper. Dacre took center stage on the parquet floor, propped upright by a hand dolly. His ribs had been cracked and spread open to display his thoracic cavity, heart and lungs replaced by a stunning floral arrangement. His hands had been severed and replaced with boughs of cypress crossed over his head, as if he were mid-way through transforming into a tree. An arrow pierced the left side of his chest where his heart once was. More flowers cascaded down his torso and legs, sewn into the bloody tracts where Dacre had been flayed.

The similarities to Raspail were striking. The same wire stitching that had been applied to Raspail held swaths of Dacre's skin around his ribs like petals. Dacre's groin had been modestly covered with pleated linen. Not a drop of blood discolored the white cloth.

Finally, nestled amid his blooming chest, was a golden apple.

"All the flowers match species grown in the greenhouses. Hyacinth, anemone, and asphodel. The Ripper sourced his materials on site," Crawford said. "Except for the apple."

"This matches the myth of Atalanta I mentioned in my report," Will said. "Three golden apples. He must be planning another murder for next Saturday."

"We'll be lucky if he stops at three."

"We passed two security cameras on the way in."

"Neither of them was recording in the first place, but he cut their cords anyway." Not surprising. It was expensive to run video surveillance. Besides the cost of the tapes, you'd need to hire someone to swap them out every few hours.

The Ripper had left Dacre's face untouched. His eyes were closed, head tilted back. He looked tranquil.

"Dacre fits my profile. Male, caucasian, mid-twenties, wavy brown hair, patchy beard, five foot nine-ish. Is that why you wanted me to see this one in particular?"

Crawford and Katz exchanged an uneasy look.

"You've caught the Ripper's attention," Katz said. She handed Will a pair of gloves and an evidence bag containing a typewritten letter. "He pinned this to Dacre's chest with the arrow. Hair and Fiber didn't find anything on it."

Will read it through the clear plastic, then read it again:

Il mio apprendista,

I have studied with enthusiasm your disgrace and public shaming that followed your bloodbath in New Orleans. Now, alas, you find yourself in bad odor with the tabloids again. I myself have suffered the indignities of their sensationalist muck-raking, but you have done much less to warrant their ire. Having borne these slings and arrows once, I'm sure you'll have the sense to take arms against your sea of troubles and end them now.

They say that you do not want for perspective, and I find myself wondering if, gazing upon my work, you are reminded of Evelda Drumgo, who you shot in the head as she held her three-month-old babe? Falling, did they too resemble the Madonna and Child in Michelangelo's Pietà? What was worst when you slaughtered her and her four compatriots? Was it the sorry petty end of a promising career or the guilty pleasure of extrajudicial punishment? Is your worst fear that you will now and forever more crave the feeling that comes from taking life? This investigation may afford you the opportunity to kill again. In that regard, I'm rooting for you.

Volo con le vostr'ale senza piume;
col vostro ingegno al ciel sempre son mosso;
dal vostro arbitrio son pallido e rosso,
freddo al sol, caldo alle più fredde brume

You, wingless, with my wings can more than run.
Your mind can soar to heaven with my mind.
My wish can make you pale, or blush. Consigned
To flames, you freeze, in ice, you die of sun.

Your job is to craft my doom, so I'm not sure how well I should wish you, but I'm sure we'll have a lot of fun.

Study well Blake's poison tree.

Tata,
Il tuo scultore

The Ripper had read the Tattler. The Ripper knew Will's name.

"This can only be about me, right?" he asked lamely.

"Unless there's another police officer who shot Drumgo, yes,"' Crawford said.

Something about the letter was troubling. Well, everything about it was troubling, but Will couldn't put his finger on the one thing that was out of place. He squeezed his eyes shut, quashed the panic in his chest, then read the letter a third time. *My apprentice. Your sculptor. Michelangelo.*

"The typewriter font is Standard Elite, six lines per vertical inch," Katz said. "We're about to send the letter to the lab for ink chromatography, so hopefully we can identify the brand of typewriter ribbon. As for the make and model of the typewriter itself, we can dust off the

Haas Atlas, but a match isn't guaranteed. The writing sample is so small, and the Ripper didn't use any Qs or Xs."

Will examined the font. Elite was one of the more common typefaces, but a defect like a deformed type slug could come in handy if they came across a typewriter later in the investigation. This one had a misaligned v and its o was off-foot.

"I think I can tell you," he said with dawning horror. "It was a Smith-Corona Electric. The ink and paper were bought at the drugstore on 24th and St. Paul."

"Wow, the guys said you were a genius, but I didn't realize you were that good."

"I'm not. The Ripper used my typewriter."

"Where is it now?" Crawford asked.

"In Chilton's basement."

Crawford stepped out of the room to give orders to a police officer.

"He used the word 'too.' Did they *too* resemble the Madonna and Child." Will recalled the figure he'd drawn comparing the copycat's work to the Pietà. "He can't mean Cassie Boyle?"

"The Ripper read your profile on Hobbs?" Katz asked. "Did you publish it?"

"No, but at this point I may as well have. Crawford! Who did you show my thesis to?"

"Katz, Price, and Zeller. That's it."

"Don't look at me, I didn't send it to anyone," Katz said.

"Will, who else has seen it?"

"Just me, Chilton, and his other student, Freddy Lounds. But I keep a copy in a desk drawer under my typewriter. The Ripper could've seen it when he typed the letter." Then Will realized that wasn't quite true. "Actually, I took that copy to Hannibal's after the basement flooded a few days ago."

"So the Ripper could've read it if he was in your room prior to the flood?"

"Or if he broke into one of your offices or Hannibal's house. I don't know if Chilton keeps a copy on hand either. He has several offices: at home, at the BSHCI, and at the university."

"He didn't have a reason to break into your house until after he read the Tattler on the 26th. When did your basement flood?"

Will gripped his head and tried to remember. His migraine was flaring up. "I think it was the 27th."

"That's a two-day window," Crawford said. "Finally, a lead. Let's check out your room."

The alarmingly short drive from the arboretum to Chilton's house was tense.

Katz tried to lighten the mood. "I don't know if this is a silver lining, but it must be reassuring to know that the Ripper likes you."

"Likes me? He vivisected my doppelganger."

"And he wrote you a letter basically claiming you as his apprentice. You, wingless, with my wings can more than run?"

"Consigned to flames, you freeze, in ice you die of sun," Will continued. "It's sarcasm. Bringing up the Drumgo scandal, rubbing in my face that he's been in my room—he wants to see me squirm."

"A thin line separates love and hate. I think he's pulling your pigtails."

"Katz," Crawford snapped. She stopped talking.

Two police vehicles were already parked outside Chilton's house when they arrived. Officers staked a caution tape perimeter around the yard and guarded the front door.

There was no sign of forced entry. Crawford and Katz pulled out their guns and assumed the weaver stance as Will unlocked the side door. They entered the basement first, checking the corners. A dehumidifier chugged away, but mold was already growing on the bottoms of the exposed studs and cardboard boxes. It smelled like a swamp.

Crawford sent two officers to check upstairs, then turned to Will. "Your typewriter?"

The square brown case sat on the top shelf where Will had left it on Tuesday. It looked innocent enough. For years the old Smith-Corona had followed him and his father from port to port. It was the only valuable Will had inherited after his father's death. Still wearing gloves, he placed the case on his writing table and pressed the button to open it.

A Ziploc bag slid off the keyboard and plopped onto the desk. It contained a severed tongue.

A chill ran down Will's spine. "Did he cut out Dacre's tongue?"

"No, but it could be Mrs. Sherman's," Crawford said. "You were sure there was no way the Ripper killed her."

"I still am. He must have taken this from someone else."

"Two tongues and you think it's a coincidence? Katz, get this to the lab and run a DNA analysis. Take the typewriter to Price while you're at it."

When Katz was gone, Crawford holstered his gun, but he kept his suit jacket tucked behind it. "Where were you last night between seven pm and seven am, Will?"

Will's hands prickled and went numb. His whole body felt covered in static, his shoulders and elbows loose, as if they might fall out of their sockets. He sat down on his exposed

mattress and tried to keep his breathing steady.

He was suddenly aware of the rhythm of quotidian tasks that stretched out before him like an infinite desolate avenue. He pictured the Ripper, faceless, performing the same mundane rituals as him at the same times of day: brushing his teeth, preparing meals, going to bed. They were synchronized, even now, at this very moment, and it would never end until one of them died.

“I’m a suspect now? I haven’t been Mirandized.”

The first hint of anger colored Crawford’s voice. “The Ripper had access to your thesis and typewriter. Answer the question, Will.”

“I was sleeping at Hannibal’s.” Will’s memory of last night’s dinner was hazy. He scrambled to sort out a timeline.

“You slept for twelve hours?”

“Maybe. I’ve been sleeping a lot lately. I don’t remember when I went to bed, but I woke up around seven.”

“Can anyone confirm that?”

“Hannibal can.”

Back in Fell’s Point, Will stumbled up to Hannibal’s front door and struggled with his keyring to open it. Crawford held him back before he could rush inside.

“I want to question him separately.”

“What? Why?”

“You brought your thesis to his house. He could have read it.”

Suspecting Will was one thing, this was another. He fought against Crawford’s arm. “That’s ridiculous. Let me go in and warn him at least.”

“You’re acting more suspicious by the second. Stand down!”

His yelling only incensed Will further. Hannibal was sitting upstairs, vulnerable, unaware that he was being pulled into Will’s nightmare world. His jaw ached, saliva pooled in his mouth, and he fought the rabid urge to bite Crawford. He only stopped struggling when Crawford reached for his gun.

“You’re out of line, Graham. Wait here and cool off.”

He disappeared into the townhouse, leaving Will to pace the sidewalk and furiously imagine a startled Hannibal making Crawford a cup of coffee, ever polite, but confused at the line of questioning and regretting his unfortunate entanglement with Will. Indeed, this was probably

the end of their provisional friendship. If the Ripper had broken into Chilton's house, what was to stop him from doing the same in Fell's Point?

Crawford returned. His face betrayed nothing. "As it stands, you and Lecter are each other's alibis. We'll question Chilton and Lounds as well, but I expect we'll find out more from door-to-door interviews. If the Ripper broke into either house, maybe the neighbors noticed something fishy." He considered Will. "Keep your head on straight. Acting like that, I don't trust you with a gun, but maybe you'll need one." He left.

Will turned to the stairs, dreading the conversation awaiting him.

"Good morning, Will." Hannibal stood at the kitchen counter, wearing his apron over a salmon pink shirt and vest. He finished cutting two sandwiches diagonally and offered him one, as if he hadn't just been interrogated by an FBI agent.

God, the man belonged in a museum. What was he doing talking to a schmuck like Will?

"What did Crawford tell you?"

"He was curious about our whereabouts last night and asked me if I'd ever read your work. He didn't explain why."

Will wasn't sure how to approach this. "We have a problem. The Ripper sent me a letter last night."

"What did it say?"

"Ah. He broke into my room. I think he's stalking me."

"That's concerning. Please eat, Will. You didn't have dinner or breakfast."

The sight of food made Will queasy. "Maybe later. Listen, I think you're taking this a little too lightly. I'll ask Crawford what it would take to assign you a police detail. I can move out by tonight."

"Move out? Whyever would you do that?"

Will pinched his brow. "I'm on a serial killer's hit list. He might follow me to your house. I'm endangering you by standing in your kitchen right now. What aren't you getting?"

Hannibal sipped his coffee. "I was just thinking it was time to increase security around here. With some new locks and window bars, I don't think there could be a safer place for you to stay."

That, Will knew, was crazy talk. They had met less than two weeks ago, and Hannibal was willing to house him, the target of a murderer, for no other reason than the enjoyment of his company?

Hannibal pushed one of the sandwiches an inch closer to Will.

“You’re insane. Absolutely, certifiably mad.”

Hannibal smiled. “No more than you are.”

“Promise you’ll be careful on your commute to the hospital. Parking garages, alleyways, anywhere isolated. If you come home after dark, don’t unlock the door near anyone suspicious. In fact, best not to be out after dark at all.”

They worried over each other for the rest of the afternoon. Will tried to convince him to ask for a police detail, but Hannibal was firm that one wasn’t necessary. Will fretted over Hannibal’s skill at self-defense and offered him lessons at the gun range. This seemed to amuse Hannibal more than anything. Having failed with the sandwich, he convinced Will to drink a glass of vegetable juice by vowing to carry a scalpel with him at all times.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts and sources for chapters 6-8.

My Foe Outstretched Beneath the Tree

Evening had fallen when someone banged at the door. Will immediately raised his hackles. Hannibal waved his scalpel in reassurance before pocketing it and returning to his book.

It was Freddy Lounds. Will could tell he had been chain-smoking from the smell and the stains on his fingers. He twitched with foreign energy.

“What do you want?” Will snarled.

“Care to explain why the FBI showed up on my doorstep this afternoon asking about you?”

“What do you mean, isn’t that an inside scoop? You should be grateful.”

“Oh, I am. The agent who interrogated me let slip that you have an admirer. How about you invite me inside so we can have a little chat?”

“I don’t think so.”

Lounds put his foot in the door to keep it from slamming shut. “You’re forgetting the dirt I already have on you. Come on, I just want to talk.”

If Lounds wanted something this badly it couldn’t be good, but Will let him in.

Lounds gave a cursory glance around the second floor, hardly acknowledging Hannibal’s presence before setting into Will. “I know how we can catch the Ripper.”

“We? As in, you and me?”

“Yup, and the FBI will be in on it too.”

“Wow. This should be interesting. Please, proceed.”

Lounds ignored his acerbic tone. “Now we know that he’s obsessed with you, we can use it to our advantage. You give an exclusive interview to the Tattler where you badmouth him—really ham it up with the insults—and disclose your whereabouts. Then Crawford puts you in a house he can case 24/7. Lure him in and take him out, simple as that.”

Hannibal sauntered over. “You’re proposing to use Will as bait.”

“Exactly. Crawford says we can try it if there’s no progress on the case by Thursday. We just need you on board.”

Crawford must be desperate if he’d agreed to this. “It’ll never work,” Will said. “It’s too obvious, and if the Ripper doesn’t strike while I’m in the safe house, what happens? Do I live there for the rest of my life?”

“If he isn’t caught, you’ll be looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life anyway—unless you want to make friends with him as badly as he does. You two would get along like a house on fire.”

Will glowered, uncomfortably aware of Hannibal’s piqued interest. “So it’s like that.”

“You get the picture now? The Tattler is running an article about you on Thursday one way or the other. All you get to decide is if you want to be the hero or the villain.”

“If you run that article,” Will ground out. “What’s to stop something from happening to you?”

“Crawford will put me in a separate safe house.”

“I don’t mean that article. The other one.”

A smile slowly spread across Lounds’s face. He stepped forward, making use of his defensive lineman’s stature to tower over Will. “Are you threatening me, Graham?”

“Of course not, but if I was as dangerous as you think I am, wouldn’t you hesitate to piss me off?”

“A pathetic schizoid like you? You couldn’t get the jump on me any more than your pencil dick could satisfy Bloom.”

Will was on Lounds before he could think. He wanted nothing more than to crush his meaty neck, but with their difference in weight class, that wouldn’t end well for Will. Instead, he aimed a jab at his stomach and an uppercut to his jaw. Lounds caught him in a roundhouse punch that had Will seeing stars. He staggered into the kitchen counter, grabbed a cutting board, and was about to wallop Lounds over the head when he was restrained from behind by a pair of arms.

The cutting board clattered to the ground as Hannibal dragged Will backwards. He shoved him against the counter, pressing his face against the cold metal. Will struggled, testing Hannibal’s surprisingly wiry strength. The hands holding his head and wrists didn’t budge.

Lounds spat blood on the tile floor. “I’ll see myself out, fellas. Good talk, Graham.” The front door slammed behind him.

Will’s skull vibrated like a tuning fork. He allowed Hannibal to set him on the couch and hold a bag of ice to his temple. After asking Will about dizziness, nausea, and blurred vision, Hannibal seemed satisfied that he didn’t have a concussion and started testing his metacarpals for fractures.

“Freddy Lounds is blackmailing you.”

Hannibal’s eleven fingers palpated Will’s hand without knowing what it had done or what else it was capable of. Amiable, reliable, and incredibly loyal for a week-old acquaintance, he’d finally glimpsed beyond the veil. For his sake, it was time for Will to disillusion him. Maybe then he’d change his mind about letting him stay.

“The Tattler isn’t completely wrong about me.”

Hannibal went to the kitchen. Will thought for a second that their relationship had ended right there, but he simply fixed two cups of tea. He offered one to Will, then sat across from him and crossed his legs, face open and curious.

“Tell me what happened. I’ll measure their words against your deeds myself.”

Will brought the mug to his face, letting it steam his glasses. He inhaled orange and cloves and cast his mind upstream to that fateful summer day.

On October 2nd, 1982, Garret Jacob Hobbs went to work to submit his letter of resignation and saw two FBI agents questioning his boss. He panicked, drove home, and killed his wife and daughter before attempting suicide. Law enforcement arrived in time to stop Hobbs from bleeding out. He received treatment at the BSHCI and remained there after Chilton testified to an appellate court that Hobbs was legally insane.

Not long after, Chilton encouraged Will and Lounds to start writing profiles on his patients, starting with Hobbs, who was one of the more lucid candidates. On three Wednesdays in July, Will picked Lounds up in his sticky, unairconditioned truck to carpool to the BSHCI. They each had an hour with Hobbs, Lounds going first.

On their first drive home, Lounds complained that Hobbs had been unresponsive to the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and disinterested in discussion of his crimes. Will answered his questions on how his own interview had gone vaguely. He was shell shocked at the time, appalled at how deeply he’d slipped into the psyche of a killer. It had been his first extended conversation with one, having only had brief contact with a handful during arrests as a police officer. He gripped the steering wheel and felt a slender white neck under his hands.

Lounds was more belligerent on the second drive home.

“The whole hour, he didn’t want to talk about anything but you. Where did Will grow up, what was his family like, what is he studying, where does he live now? Will Graham this, Will Graham that. I told him, ‘Ask him yourself, he’s coming in right after me.’ Then he clammed up. What the hell did you two talk about last week?”

“Not much.” Will shuddered. He tried to concentrate on the road instead of the image of Elise Nichols hung on a rack of antlers in a cabin in the woods.

On the third and final drive home, a protracted heatwave accompanied by oppressive humidity turned the truck into an oven, even with the windows down. Besides the squeak of skin sticking to leather, they were both quiet.

Will could only imagine what Lounds and Hobbs had discussed during their last interview. He was sure it had to do with himself but didn’t care to ask, not in the mood to deal with petty resentment after abandoning a wailing Hobbs at the end of the cell block minutes ago. Part of him was still in Minnesota, bleeding out on a linoleum kitchen floor.

“You know what?” Lounds finally said. “I bet you more than anything, Hobbs was fucking them.”

Will swallowed a wave of unjustifiable anger. “He wasn’t.”

“You sure? A weirdo kidnapping pretty high school girls, most of them virgins? A sane man would be fucking them, much less an insane one.”

“He would never. They were surrogates for his daughter, which you would understand if you managed to actually talk to him.”

“Don’t be naive. Just because you have some sort of bizarre mind meld going on with him doesn’t mean Hobbs wouldn’t take advantage of a good situation as much as the next guy.”

“So that’s what you would do?”

“Do you need me to spell it out for you? What a sweet little angel. Will Graham, patron saint of serial killers. I saw you getting coffee with Alana Bloom the other day. What’re you two, a thing?”

“We’re friends.”

“Sure you are. You know, I grew up in Chicago, played football in high school. My buddies and I had some real good times back then. We split up after graduation but always made a point to catch a Maroons game during Thanksgiving break. One of the boys studied at the University of Chicago—that’s where you went, right? What a coincidence. Anyway, he was dating a freshman at the time who was the spitting image of Bloom.

“It was her first time at a football match and you could tell she didn’t know how to handle her beer yet. And she liked beer. Wanted to impress us, wanted to prove she was an adult so bad. We had to take her under the bleachers to settle her down. My buddy’s a real gentleman, always sharing with the rest of us. That’s what real men are like, Graham. And the funny part is, she never even remembered what happened.”

Waves of hot and cold ran down Will’s back. The yellow road lines buzzed phosphorescent. He would later recall what happened next as if someone else had done it, like the devil had possessed his body and spoken with his voice.

“Maybe you’re right about Hobbs, but you’re wrong about me. I’m no saint.”

“So the goody-goody front is an act?”

“Let’s just say I know how to take advantage of a good situation when I see one too. I’m actually on my way to see someone after I drop you off. Would you like to meet her?”

Suspicion and curiosity warred in Lounds. “I thought you were into Bloom.”

“Alana? She’s just an old flame, nothing serious. I’m always on the lookout for something new.”

“Shit, are you talking about Pierce?” Julie Pierce had taken the introductory psychology course they had TA’d last semester and had always attended Will’s office hours. She’d be a sophomore in September. “So that’s how the bitch got straight As.”

Will didn’t confirm or deny his assumption. He turned onto a side street, did a three point turn, and drove toward his secret spot on the Gunpowder.

“Wow, you really take them out to the middle of nowhere,” Lounds said, looking up and down the empty road where Will pulled over.

“You’d be surprised how many girls enjoy fishing.”

Slapping at mosquitos and tripping over roots, Lounds followed him along the deer trail to the edge of the gurgling creek, which was sluggish from the recent lack of rain. Cicadas droned in the canopy. The combined noise of the river and the insects forced them to raise their voices.

“She said to meet her on the other side. I’m gonna piss, you go on ahead.”

Lounds squinted at the trees across the stream. “I don’t see her.”

“Probably off chasing a bird,” Will said. He examined the larger stones closer to the tree line and hefted one. It had a satisfying granite weight. “Do you see her backpack?”

“Nah. Graham, I’m starting to think—”

Will cracked the stone over Lounds’s head and kicked him in the back. Lounds slipped on the pebbles with a shout and fell face first into the river. Coughing, he struggled to his hands and knees but didn’t find his feet before Will jumped on him. Lounds crumpled under his weight. His shrieks, high pitched and nasal, gurgled under four inches of water. Will slammed the stone into his parietal lobe over and over, until he saw blood mix with wet, blond hair.

Breathing heavily from exertion, Will let the stone drop. Washed clean by the current, it became just another river rock. With great effort, he dragged Lounds out of the stream and flipped him over. His lungs rattled with water, but he was still breathing.

What was to be done with him? Would Lounds remember what had happened if he lived? Could Will get away with it if he died? Even if the police could make the connection, his friends were unlikely to publicly admit what they’d done to Alana. There was no motive, no weapon, and—with a shovel, a cooler, and enough time—he could easily dispose of the body.

Will knelt to feel under his skull. Minimal fracturing, miraculously, but nice hair for tying flies. Plenty of meat on him too. He itched to sever his jugular and watch him bleed out.

The issue was the timing. Will was the last person seen with Lounds so he’d bear the brunt of suspicion. That meant warrants, police questioning, and background checks. He might even have to give up his secret fishing spot. That pained him more than anything else about the situation.

If Lounds lived, he could have Will tried for first degree assault, which could land him in jail for a maximum of twenty-five years in Maryland. However, there was no proof that Will had even been there during the injury. Maybe Lounds had slipped while hiking and hit his head. The most damning piece of evidence would be an oddly shaped bruise on his lower back, which could have been caused by a rock if Lounds had fallen backwards.

And what would Lounds's story be anyway? "He lured me into the woods with promises of a teenage girl, officer! And you'll never guess what I did to make him angry!" Not the best light in which to portray yourself, especially if your name was tied to one of the biggest tabloids in the United States. Will savored the thought of Lounds being devoured by his own journalistic machine. No, neither of them was innocent here.

Decision made, Will returned to his truck and drove away. He didn't go fishing again until he heard from Chilton that Lounds was in the hospital for a head injury. At the time, Will had hoped that Lounds would consider the experience a lesson learned and move on, but he had no such luck.

Now he sat across from Hannibal, his bag of ice half melted, both mugs of tea untouched. "No matter what happens, he comes out on top. He either makes millions off a book on how he caught the Ripper, or he gets revenge by using the Ripper to kill me. Ideally, he gets both." Will fell silent, heart beating out of his chest.

As always, Hannibal's face was hard to read. He studied the carpet and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. The guillotine was poised over Will's neck, Hannibal's hand on the lever. Was he aware of the power he held in that moment? At length, he said, "You didn't kill Freddy Lounds."

"I thought about it. I'm still not entirely sure that wasn't my intention."

"Would it have felt good?"

He could barely admit it to himself. It was terrifying to admit it aloud.

"Yes."

Will waited for Hannibal's judgment, banging on his cell walls as desperately as Hobbs had. Seconds passed with agonizing slowness.

"Killing must feel good to God too. He does it all the time. Only last week in Texas, he dropped a church roof on the heads of his worshippers as they sang a hymn." Hannibal leaned forward and threaded his fingers together. "He wouldn't begrudge you one journalist."

It was an absolution. Will took a shaky breath. "I killed more people than the Tooth Fairy down in New Orleans. Almost killed Lounds. You should be afraid of me. Anybody would ask me to leave."

"We both deal with death professionally. Often, it's incidental, but sometimes it's deserved. It's beautiful in its own way, giving voice to the unmentionable: that there can be a man so bad that killing him would feel good."

“Oh, God. I’ve corrupted you.” Will covered his face with his hands. “What would Alana say?”

“Alana has nothing to do with this,” Hannibal snapped, betraying a hint of anger for the first time. “I got here on my own, I’m glad to have you beside me, and I would miss our conversations, so please don’t say that you want to leave.” It was an unconditional gift and a humble plea.

“I don’t want to leave.”

“Then stay.”

On Will’s storm-wracked ship, a frayed rope snapped and spilled overboard. He couldn’t catch it without being dragged under by the sublime force lurking below. It was beyond rational thought, a natural phenomenon like a hurricane or an earthquake—the Leviathan that had stalked him since he’d shot Evelda Drumgo. Yes, he would stay. He hardly had a choice.

“What is this?” he asked, dazed.

“I believe they call it friendship.” Hannibal checked his watch. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to make some phone calls.”

Monday, October 3rd, 1983

At Hannibal’s request, Will made himself at home in the fourth-floor study. The fax machine screeched and buzzed as it spat out Dacre’s novel-length case file courtesy of Crawford. Will reviewed the pages as they printed. He felt guilty besmirching Hannibal’s neatly organized desk with the mess of crime scene photos. Their atrocity was accentuated against his clean graphite illustrations of Florentine architecture.

There were a few differences in the treatment of Dacre and Raspail. First, the Ripper had depilated Dacre from the neck down and massaged his skin with a mixture of oil and resin, possibly to achieve a better effect of marble sculpture. Second, while Raspail had been operated on post-mortem, Dacre’s free histamines and serotonin levels indicated that he’d been alive up to the removal of his lungs. His adrenaline and cortisol levels along with traces of chloroform suggested that he’d been unconscious. Will wondered if the Ripper had stopped to admire Dacre’s beating heart before tearing it out.

All the leads uncovered yesterday had gone cold. Unsurprisingly, the Ripper hadn’t left fingerprints on Dacre, the letter, or the typewriter. Two copies of Will’s thesis—the ones in Quantico and the BSHCI—had video surveillance, but neither system had captured anything suspicious. Considering that a copy had been available in Will’s room, it seemed unlikely that he had read it elsewhere. Door-to-door canvassing the neighbors in Roland Park and Fell’s Point hadn’t uncovered anything useful.

Crawford had consulted experts in classical studies at Harvard, Stanford, and the Metropolitan Museum. They had all arrived at one conclusion: this tableau was an ode to the

beautiful young men who transformed into vegetation—cypress, hyacinth, and anemone—in *The Metamorphoses*. Will's cringed as he read the myth of Cyparissus:

Then came a cypress with its cone-shaped fruit:
The tree was once a boy loved by Apollo,
God of the twanging lyre and bow.
And at that time there was a stately deer,
Worshiped by nymphs who shared his neighborhood,
A pretty pasture called Carthaean Field.
His eyes were shaded by broad-branching antlers
Which shone in burnished gold, and at this throat
A collar breathed of many coloured jewels;
Even at his birth he wore a silver crown,
And glinting round his head and from his ears
Were strung the daintiest of Orient pearls.
The creature had instinctive faith in man;
He walked in homes where strangers kissed his forehead.
All seemed to love him, but beyond all others
His sweetest lover was young Cyparissus.
Daily he led the deer to greenest pastures,
To drink at the fountains in Carthaean meadows.
He gathered violets and pinks and daisies
To dress the deer's antlers in a wreath of flowers,
And then as if the boy were a bold rider
He'd mount the creature's back or stroll beside him;
Like a proud master with a dancing stallion,
He fashioned reins and bit of purple silk
To lead the deer, caressing his soft lips.

At noon one summer's day—it was the hour
When the deer sank down to rest, to wet his lips
At a cool spring flowing in a wooded covert.
Not knowing that the deer had strayed so far,
And glancing carelessly through shuttered leaves,
The boy thrust a quick spear through the deer's side,
And when poor Cyparissus gazed and saw
The blood, the open wound, the dying deer,
He knew his love was lost and wished to die.
Tears drained the manhood from his slender thighs,
His fair white body took a greenish tint;
The waving hair that used to hide his forehead
Grew upward like a green and thorny tower.
He was a tree whose shapely topmost branches
Stared at the stars across the circling night.
Apollo sighed, his own eyes filled with sadness,
"You whom I weep for, shall share grief with others,
And you shall stand wherever mourners are."

He squinted at the text and read it again, but failed to see how it could hold any significance to the Ripper. He set it aside and flipped to the myth of Hyacinthus:

My father loved the boy; he thought him sweeter
Than any living creature of his kind—
And Delphi, capital of sacred glory,
Was like a tomb deserted by Apollo.
The god went ranging after boyish pleasures
And strolled suburban Sparta, field and river.
Bored with the arts of music and long bow,
He found distraction near his lover's home.
Humble as any mountain guide or shepherd,
He carried bird nets, tended dogs and leashed them,
And joined the boy in day-long mountain climbing.
This native life stirred Phoebus' appetite
And made the boy more charming now than ever.
When Phoebus-Titan came at noon, half way
Between grey mourning and the evening's pallor,
The lovers, naked, sleeked themselves with oil,
And stood at discus-throw. Phoebus came first,
And like a shot he whirled the disk midair
To cut a cloud in two. It disappeared;
It looked as if the thing had gone forever—
And eager to retrieve it, Hyacinthus
Ran out to meet it where it seemed to fall.
Then like a ricocheting wheel of fire,
It glanced a rock and struck the boy full face.
As pale as Death itself, the god rushed toward him,
To fold the shrinking creature in his arms,
To bind his broken features with sweet grasses,
To cure his ragged lips and sightless eyes
But all of Phoebus' healing arts were useless:
As in a garden, if one breaks a flower,
Crisp violet or poppy or straight lily
Erect with yellow stamens pointed high,
The flower wilts, head toppled into earth,
So bent the dying face of Hyacinthus,
Staring at nothingness toward breast and shoulder.
"Even now, my child, your hour is passed, is run,"
Cried Phoebus, "and my hand your murderer,
And yet its crime was meeting yours at play.
Was that a crime? Or was my love to blame—
The guilt that follows love that loves too much?
You should have lived forever in my sight,
Your life well-earned, and my life given for it."

Will's mouth twisted as he imagined his own face turned into a pulp by a rogue discus. It was difficult to see past the homoerotic overtones—which were surely meant to mock either

Dacre or himself—and attribute any larger meaning to the passage. He moved on to the myth of Adonis, who failed to heed Venus's warnings and was killed by a boar while hunting, then was turned into a flower as well. The three stories didn't have much in common beyond the immortalization through metamorphosis of a loved one. If he didn't know better, he would think the Ripper was preemptively mourning him.

The meaning behind the Ripper's letter was more straightforward. One professor of Renaissance Studies had identified the source of the Italian verse. Though the Ripper had flipped the perspective from first to second in his English translation, it was from a letter written by Michelangelo to Tammaso dei Cavalieri, a model he'd used for several of his sketches and paintings. Another dagger to drive home the point: Will would provide the materials for a tableau, one way or another, and he should dread the hour of his transformation.

The oddest inclusion was the shoe-horned mention of William Blake. It seemed out of left field to complicate the theme of Mediterranean metamorphosis with a diddy written by an English Romantic but, as the Ripper requested, he studied the poem A Poison Tree, along with its original watercolor.

I was angry with my friend.
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe.
I told it not. My wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears
Night & morning with my tears
And I sunned it with smiles
And with soft deceitful wiles

And it grew both day and night
Till it bore an apple bright
And my foe beheld it shine
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole
When the night had veiled the pole
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

Here again were weaponized apples as in the myth of Atalanta. Was it a warning for Will not to covet what belonged to the Ripper? That was nonsense. The poem would probably require a visit to the Peabody Library to fully understand. He sighed. The Ripper assigning him homework flustered him more than he cared to admit. Headache flaring, he set the letter aside.

The most disturbing news was the confirmation that the tongue in the Ziploc bag was indeed Mrs. Sherman's. Will was at a loss to explain this. Crawford was happy, perhaps even relieved, to accept that the Tooth Fairy and the Ripper were the same man, but Will wasn't. He was certain that nothing short of a psychotic break—more psychotic than usual, anyway

—could have induced the Ripper to create that two-bit horror show up in Pittsburgh. He looked between photos of Dacre at the arboretum and Mrs. Sherman on the birch. Never had he seen more dissimilar minds. Barring the inferior craftsmanship, why leave so much evidence—DNA, bite marks, hand spread—at one crime scene while meticulously withholding it at the others?

There was an obvious answer. The Ripper and the Tooth Fairy weren't the same person, but they had met. That meant that, unless they had known each other prior to September 28th, there might be some clue that could lead one to the other without being noticed by anyone else. The Tooth Fairy might've left such a clue in Pittsburgh along with his fannish display of Mrs. Sherman. But no crime scene photos had been leaked to the public as far as Will knew, so how would the Ripper have seen it, short of visiting the Sherman house himself?

He reluctantly turned to the other option. The Ripper had read the Tattler and decided to pay Will a visit. Might the Tooth Fairy have done the same? Did they meet each other outside of Chilton's house on the night of the 27th? Did the Tooth Fairy hide Mrs. Sherman's tongue in the typewriter case himself?

He didn't know which possibility was most likely, but he knew which was most terrifying. His neck prickled as he imagined the two discussing him behind his back, planning his murder together.

The doorbell rang, knocking Will out of his rumination. Hannibal would be at the hospital until six at least. Who was calling at this time? A list of candidates, each more menacing than the last, marched through his mind. He didn't know if he'd rather see the Ripper or Freddy Lounds at the moment.

He crept downstairs to the kitchen, selected a carving knife from the block, then looked through the peephole of the front door. It was a man he'd never seen before. He wore a baseball cap and a utility belt.

"Who is it?"

"Locksmith here to install two MCS deadbolts."

Hannibal had mentioned an increase in security. He hadn't said a locksmith was coming today, but Will's memory was so porous lately it was possible he'd forgotten. He considered calling the hospital before realizing he didn't have the number.

Posing as a tradesperson was textbook in burglary. If the locksmith was one of the killers, this was the perfect opportunity to case the house before coming back at night to let himself in with a copy of their key. But how could he have known Hannibal was increasing security instead of kicking Will out?

Will was struck with a sudden paranoia that Hannibal's house was bugged, and their every word was being listened to. He tamped it down. *Keep it together, Graham.*

None of the victims had hired a handyman within six months of their murders, so this would be a new strategy as well as a bold one. But maybe it made sense to try something this bold.

He knew Will was familiar with his patterns so he might want to mix it up.

“Sir? I have another appointment in two hours. Do you want the locks or not?” The locksmith took off his cap and scratched his balding pate.

There was only one way to find out if this man was a murderer. Will hid the carving knife behind his back and opened the door.

“...Are you going to let me in?” The locksmith wrung his cap.

Will reluctantly stood aside to let him into the foyer. He set down his toolbox and looked down the hall, turning his back to Will.

“Could you point out the door to the garage before I get started?”

Will shoved his thumb in its direction. It was beyond the stairwell and down four steps.

“Thanks.” He cleared his throat, eyes flicking down to the arm Will still held behind his back. “I’ll get to work then.”

Will stood at the end of the hall and watched him unscrew the faceplate of the garage door lock. He cast glances back at Will every minute or so, dropping his screwdriver twice before the plate came off. Why was he nervous? Did he know Will suspected him? Would he try to kill Will before he could call the police? Should Will subdue him now, while he had his back turned? The handle of the carving knife grew slippery with sweat.

The locksmith switched on a power tool and started drilling several holes in the door. The shrill whine jackhammered Will’s skull as if it was his head being drilled instead of the door. He couldn’t think. The carving knife fell to the floor as he doubled over.

“Are you ok?” The locksmith yelled over the noise.

Will reached behind him, grasped the handle of the front door, and stumbled onto the pavement outside. All suspicions forgotten, just desperate to get away, he set out into the city of Baltimore.

He wasn’t conscious of which direction he took. His legs carried him to a bus stop, the bus took him to a subway, and before he knew it he was standing outside the wrought iron gate of the arboretum. It was closed. A tall, spiked fence ran down the road on either side. How had the Ripper gotten into the arboretum after hours?

Will followed the fence. It continued north along the sidewalk, then turned onto a less busy side street where it was almost subsumed by trees and shrubs. After another hundred and fifty meters, the fence ended at a yellow utility gate with a sign that read OFFICIAL BUSINESS ONLY. It was a side entrance for horticulturalists and landscapers. The iron fence didn’t extend all the way to the gate, so it could be circumvented on foot. For the Ripper, who had needed a vehicle, it would have been simple to break the padlock on a deserted road like this.

He side-stepped the gate and walked up to the greenhouse. It was still covered with caution tape. The Ripper had smashed a pane of glass and reached inside to unlock the greenhouse

door. Someone had taped over the hole with cardboard to save the plants inside from the October chill. Through the glass, Will saw a riot of greenery but nothing distinct enough to identify.

“Hey! What are you doing?” A police officer jogged over from the parking lot. “You can’t be here.”

“Will Graham.” He showed the officer his driver’s license. “I was here yesterday with Agent Crawford.”

The officer didn’t recognize his name. He radioed the station, but no one there had heard of Will either. “This is private property, sir. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Will looked back at the greenhouse doorknob, one of several on the property that the Ripper had handled. He was itching to touch it. “Are they still taking evidence up at the mansion, officer?”

“I can’t tell you that. Now if you don’t skedaddle, I’ll have to book you for obstruction of justice.”

Will walked back down the side entrance road until he couldn’t see the officer, then ducked into the trees. He wandered the arboretum grounds, staying out of sight of the mansion and parking lots. The property was surrounded on two sides by dense shrubbery impassable on foot. A highway ran along the third side. Several paths snaked through the wooded areas, but it was in one of the manicured gardens that he found what he was looking for.

Cypresses lined one of the pathways leading to the mansion, all tall, thin, and perfectly pruned except for one. It sported a bald patch where several branches had been lopped off. The cuts wept beads of yellow sap. Sawdust clung to the edges. The Ripper had used a pruning saw.

Will examined the branch stubs. A twig had been crushed close to the end of one. The Ripper had snapped it while holding the branch steady. Without gloves—without thinking—Will grasped the branch where the Ripper had. *You whom I weep for, shall share grief with others, and you shall stand wherever mourners are.*

All that poetry about grieving the dead, but the Ripper had not grieved for Dacre. He’d ripped out his lungs while he was still breathing. Why? Both Raspail and Dacre had been unconscious from the moment they were kidnapped until their deaths. Why operate on Raspail post-mortem but keep Dacre alive?

Will closed his eyes and entered the Ripper’s workshop.

Dacre lays on the bloodletting table. I make incisions around the pectorals and diaphragm, then cut Dacre’s sternum with a saw. I start with the inferior ribs and work my way upwards, cracking and pulling them aside one by one. At last the lungs are exposed, immobile without connection to the diaphragm. I grip his bronchial tubes, sever his trachea, and pull the lungs away from the body to set them aside. There’s the heart, still beating in a great pool of blood.

I watch in fascination as it slows and finally stops. It's hard to tell if Dacre dies of blood loss or suffocation.

The killing was *dispassionate*, like the factory slaughter of farm animals. Why would a sadist sedate someone before torturing and killing them? What's more, Raspail was bled to reduce cleanup and siphoning during the sculpting of the abdominal cavity, but the Ripper had let Dacre bleed freely. So if he couldn't get a sadistic thrill from Dacre's pain, nor a clean canvas to work with, what was the point? A peek at Dacre's beating heart?

Will was suddenly reminded of the law prohibiting the sale of animal lungs as a food item in the United States. The reasoning was that gastrointestinal fluid backed up in the esophagus and entered the lungs during the slaughtering process, contaminating them and making them unfit for consumption. The law had resulted in an amusing black market trade of Scottish haggis—which contained sheep lung—smuggled into the country via suitcase.

Will considered the other surgical trophies collected by the Ripper. Kidney, stomach, liver, and heart. All organs used in cooking. He supposed the Ripper had taken various muscles as well from Raspail's abdomen and Dacre's thorax. Victims unconscious, the flavor of the meat would have been saved from the acidic taste of fear.

Bowled over, he clutched the cypress branch as one would a lifeline. He examined himself. Was he making this up? Did he have cannibalism on the brain from spending so much time in Hobbs's? No, he was sure.

The Ripper was eating the organs.

Love on a Couch

Will Graham was not well.

Hiding amongst roses and burning bushes, Dolarhyde watched the man aimlessly wander the arboretum grounds for several hours. He was paler and thinner than he'd been last week. His cheeks were sunken, his hair lank with sweat. Dolarhyde marveled at how the Ripper was slowly starving Graham without even confining him to his golden cage.

His run-in with the police at the greenhouse had been tense. Graham hadn't seemed aware of the impression he made, with his unfocused gaze and jerky movements. The young officer had raised his voice and kept his hand on his gun until Graham finally turned away.

Graham twitched nervously and hunched under maples to avoid detection from the officers in the mansion, traipsing past crabapples and dahlias, following no apparent path or plan. At one point, he held an arborvitae by a branch and murmured to it like a lover. He showed no reaction when the sun disappeared behind blue-gray clouds and it started to mist. His glasses fogged with condensation, and Dolarhyde doubted if he could even see.

As the sun set, Graham headed downhill, following a spice bush trail until it became a well-worn public walking path. They walked south for another hour, Dolarhyde lagging fifty meters behind. Graham's movements were slow and erratic. With a shout, he ripped off his hunting jacket and dropped it like it was on fire. He left it there despite the rain, the plummeting temperature, and the fact that he only wore a thin t-shirt underneath. Dolarhyde picked up the jacket, brushed it off, and kept following.

After an hour they reached a deserted Druid Hill Park, no one else willing to brave the rain and cold at night. Though it was more open than the arboretum woods, Dolarhyde could conceal himself in shadows between streetlamps. Crossing gardens and dirt bike trails, Graham led him to a hillside slippery with goose shit overlooking a lake. He sat against a cherry tree and hugged himself, wet and shivering.

Dolarhyde had read about encephalitis at the library. Graham was in the beginning stage, still able to walk and talk but suffering from bouts of psychosis. He thought back to their encounter at the fishing hole, made possible through either hallucination, prosopagnosia, or Capgras delusion. Soon, he'd lose his sense of self, control over his bladder, and become catatonic for weeks before dying. This was the fate that the Ripper envisioned for Will Graham.

He hefted his nine-millimeter automatic with its homemade silencer, hidden in the pocket of his bomber jacket. An eight-year-old's vague memories of slow, undignified death at his grandmother's nursing home resurfaced. Did Graham deserve to go that way? The man had tasted the Dragon's blood and smiled. He had taught him to fish and hugged him like a brother. Dolarhyde shuddered remembering that embrace. No matter that he was delusional. He'd earned a quick, painless death, and Dolarhyde could give that to him.

Dolarhyde approached him, lifted his pistol, and aimed it point blank at his forehead. Graham didn't flinch or even acknowledge the gun but raised his face to meet Dolarhyde's eyes. As before in the Ripper's study, he lit up with the purest empathy, betraying the slightest flash of the Dragon.

"It's you," Graham said, voice wracked from shivering.

"Who do you see?" Dolarhyde didn't care about speaking around sibilants. He needed Graham to see him, not Garret Jacob Hobbs. Graham would appreciate his Becoming before he died.

"Why didn't you use a candle?"

The gun wavered. "What?"

"I would've lit a candle at the Shermans'. The flickering light would've simulated expression, like their eyes were moving."

When Dolarhyde didn't respond, Graham settled back against the cherry tree and closed his eyes. Rain gathered on his cheeks and rolled down his neck. His t-shirt was soaked through, clinging to his shoulders and chest, revealing his wasted figure.

A drop fell from the silencer and landed on his forehead.

Killing Graham could wait. They would have one last conversation. He would make Graham truly understand that Dolarhyde was not a man, but by the grace of God had become Other and More than a man.

Doll-like, Graham's head fell forward onto his shoulder as Dolarhyde shoved his arms into the abandoned hunting jacket one at a time. Jacket in place, he lifted him. The man weighed nothing, so much easier to carry because he wasn't limp. He sat him at a picnic table sheltered from the rain under a pavilion.

Graham discovered Dolarhyde's body heat during the move. "My God, that's good." He crawled into his lap and pressed his damp torso against him, nestling into his bomber jacket and pushing cold wet hands into his warm dry spaces.

Heat flushed Dolarhyde's neck. This was like their hug at the river. Graham didn't know what he was doing. It didn't mean anything, so it didn't matter that Dolarhyde brought his arms around the man, rubbing his back to warm him up.

"What do you know of Me, Will Graham?" he asked. "My Work? My Becoming? My Art?"

Graham's breath gusted over the bite mark he'd given Dolarhyde several days ago, now scabbed over. He ran his lips over it, distracted. "When did I bite you?"

Dolarhyde jerked away. He tried not to feel the warmth blooming between them. "Listen to me. I have dared more than you, I have pressed my unique seal so much deeper in the earth, where it will last longer than your dust. Your life to mine is a slug track on stone. A thin

silver mucus track in and out of the letters on my monument." The words Dolarhyde had written in his journal swarmed in him now.

Graham rearranged himself so that they were pressed tighter together. Dolarhyde had to tip his head to make space for him.

"Before Me you are a slug in the sun," Dolarhyde continued. "You are privy to a great Becoming and you recognize nothing. You are an ant in the afterbirth."

"What should I call you?"

Dolarhyde knew what Graham meant, what he was too polite to say. *What should I call you besides the demeaning nickname used by the press?* The Tooth Fairy. What could be more inappropriate? He was the Dragon, but he stuttered on the word.

"D-. You can call me D."

"I know what you want. I'm good at that. Knowing."

Dolarhyde didn't ask what he wanted. He sat very still. He wanted to think of Mrs. Sherman, but he knew Will Graham would never survive that. He did not want Graham to die. He did not think of her. He was proud of his self-control.

"Do you want me to give it to you, D?"

Graham's heart was loud and fluttering, trying to get out. Trying to get out. Graham spread his hands warm on his chest.

Dolarhyde was trembling. He must keep his hands off Graham's neck. Keep them off. He squeezed the bench beneath him until it splintered.

Breath hot on his mouth. A living person. How bizarre.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

Startled by the voice, Dolarhyde pushed Graham off and stood up. He turned in its direction, but there was only the darkness beyond the empty pavilion.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

He knew who spoke and he was frightened. From the beginning, he and the Dragon had been one. He was Becoming and the Dragon was his higher self. Their bodies, voices, wills were one.

Not now.

"N-nothing." It was hard for Dolarhyde to say.

"SPEAK UP. I CAN'T UNDERSTAND YOU. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

“I’m ‘illing Will Graham.”

“NO, YOU AREN’T. YOU WANT HIM TO BE YOUR LITTLE BUDDY, DON’T YOU?”

“I on’t want a li’l… buddy.” With fear his speech was failing, he had to occlude his nostrils with his upper lip.

“A STUPID LIE.” The Dragon’s voice was strong and clear. He said the “s” without effort. “YOU FORGET THE BECOMING. KILL WILL GRAHAM.”

Dolarhyde turned to Will and aimed his gun. He was an animal, a slug, an ant. Desperately, he tried to force himself to pull the trigger. They were in public. The police could pass by at any moment. He had to do this now and run.

Will was shivering again. He sprawled on his back, dazed from hitting his head on the concrete, stunned like the fish they had caught together. He struggled to focus on Dolarhyde, gaze sliding past the gun to his face. He didn’t register the danger he was in. “D?”

“Mleedse.”

“UNACCEPTABLE. KILL HIM.”

“nyus mhor a niddow wyow.”

“YOU ARE OFFAL LEFT BEHIND IN THE BECOMING. YOU ARE OFFAL AND I WILL NAME YOU. YOU ARE CUNT FACE. SAY IT.”

Will was overcome with the Dragon’s power. His shivering turned into violent shaking. His eyes rolled up until Dolarhyde only saw the whites. His limbs, stiff as boards, kicked out wildly.

“leeb ‘im alone.” He dropped the gun and fell at Will’s side, hands hovering uselessly over the seizing man.

“YOU SNIVELING HARELIP. WHO WOULD BE FRIENDS WITH YOU? SAY IT.”

“i am cunt face.” He occluded his nostrils with his lip to say the words.

“SOON I WILL BE CLEANSED OF YOU,” the Dragon said effortlessly. “WILL THAT BE GOOD?”

“Good.”

“WHO WILL BE NEXT WHEN IT IS TIME?”

“mrs… ‘acobi.”

Sharp pain shot through Dolarhyde, pain and terrible fear.

“DO YOU WANT ME TO CUT IT OFF?”

“‘g’am… i’ll give you g’am.”

“YOU WILL GIVE ME NOTHING. HE IS MINE. THEY ARE ALL MINE. WILL GRAHAM AND THE JACOBIS. GOODBYE, CUNT FACE.”

The Dragon left Dolarhyde to watch Will flop and punch the air. It was his fault. He had brought the Dragon to Will and the Dragon was killing him. Should he take him to the hospital? No, they couldn’t be seen together. He circled and watched for what felt like hours. Finally, Will rolled over, coughed specks of blood onto the pavilion floor, and fell unconscious.

Dolarhyde listened to his heartbeat. It was irregular, but it was strong. Not like Mrs. Sherman’s. He was alive for now.

The Ripper would know how to save Will if he was dying, but Dolarhyde did not want to give Will back. Maybe the Ripper would let him die anyway. Maybe he would never see Will again. Two desires battled inside him, but he had no choice. He lifted Will with no more effort than he would a kitten and carried him down the hill to the nearest street. He flagged down a taxi, supporting his weight with one arm.

“He ok?” The driver asked, looking at Will in the rearview mirror.

“yehn.” Dolarhyde cleared his throat and corrected himself. “Yes.” He gave the man the address and kept his face down for the short ride. Will did not move save for his shallow breaths.

Metal bars had been installed on all the windows in the Ripper’s lair. Dolarhyde’s glass cutter would no longer be useful here.

The Ripper answered the doorbell so quickly he had to have been waiting near it. He surveyed the two of them.

Both of Dolarhyde’s hands were occupied with Will’s limp form, no way for him to be holding a weapon. Will’s head rested against Dolarhyde’s chest. Blood flecked his t-shirt where he had coughed it up. They were soaking wet.

“He needs help,” Dolarhyde said. His voice was clear and strong.

The Ripper stood aside to let them in.

Dolarhyde maneuvered Will into a bridal carry and skipped up the steps to set him on a couch. His senses sharpened to a point as he turned his back to the Ripper. Let him try to kill the Dragon now. He would see what happened. His gun sat heavy in his pocket.

The Ripper took Will’s pulse and examined his eyes. “Thank you for returning him. Where did the blood come from?”

“He coughed it up after a seizure.”

He opened Will’s mouth and looked inside. “How long ago did it happen?”

“Half an hour.”

He hummed. “Before Will wakes, I must warn you. What you are doing is extremely dangerous. Will is very perceptive, and there’s no way to predict what he will or won’t remember without the use of drugs.”

It irked Dolarhyde to be scolded. He was the Dragon; he didn’t have to be afraid. He knew Will would not be afraid either. A living vessel. The only barriers between them were Will’s illness and the Ripper.

“I’m not afraid.”

“Are you not afraid of the law, or are you not afraid of me?” The Ripper let his mask slip for an instant. Though he was smaller than Dolarhyde, he held a cold fire that could match the Dragon’s heat. “Will is in a delicate state. We needn’t quarrel as long as you don’t interfere with his progress.”

“Will he be alright?”

“He will live tonight, yes.”

Dolarhyde clenched his fists. He could shoot the Ripper right now and take Will away. But Will would die in Dolarhyde’s care.

“Save him.”

“How curious. You begged me to let you kill him last Friday. Is this a change of heart?”

I HAVE NEVER SEEN A CHILD AS DISGUSTING AND DIRTY AS YOU.

“Just save him.”

“He was reviewing your case file the other day. He described you perfectly to me. The moment he sees you in the waking world, he will recognize your face.”

YOU PITIFUL WEAK HARELIP, YOU’D KEEP YOUR LITTLE BUDDY FROM ME, WOULD YOU? I’LL TEAR HIM APART AND RUB HIS PIECES ON YOUR UGLY FACE. I’LL HANG YOU WITH HIS LARGE INTESTINE IF YOU OPPOSE ME. YOU KNOW I CAN.

“I don’t care.”

“Why not?”

YOU’RE THE DIRTIEST-

“Please. He’s not like the others. He’s… nice.”

The Ripper’s face softened almost imperceptibly. “What was he like when you caught your fish?”

Dolarhyde considered his words carefully. He stood between the crackling fireplace and the chaise lounge, damned murderer of four, and petitioned for Will's life. "Happy. It didn't matter what I'd done. He treated me like family."

"Aliudque cupido, mens aliud suadet," the Ripper murmured. His fingers spidered toward Will's wrist and felt his pulse again, as if by habit. "I will think about it."

***

Through the curtains by the front door, Hannibal watched the dragon until he passed from sight. He'd thought that iron bars and new locks would be enough to keep the parvenu out, but he hadn't accounted for the uncontrollable stochasticity that was Will. Marked by two murderers, a sensible man wouldn't wander the city streets after dark, but Will was not in full possession of his mental faculties. He cursed the dragon's folly. How many witnesses had seen him drag Will's unconscious body to the doorstep?

Hannibal returned upstairs to set the scene. The most difficult part was changing Will out of his bloody t-shirt. Not only was it wet and sticking to Will's back, but it reeked of the dragon's arousal and—hatefully—Will's own. He told himself it was empathetic reflection, like what Will had experienced at the Shermans'. On top of this, Hannibal reminded himself that hypersexuality was one of the rarer symptoms of encephalitis, comorbid with aggression.

He ended up cutting the shirt off.

After toweling Will dry, he dressed him in his least offensive flannel, propped him upright near the fire, and wrapped him in a blanket. In a facsimile of yesterday's conversation, he set two mugs of tea in front of them and settled down to read his copy of La Divina Commedia. It was an old favorite, but he didn't get far before he found himself regarding Will once more.

What mesmerism had Will performed on the dragon to sway him so completely in such a short amount of time? Besides saving his own life, he'd driven a wedge between Hannibal and his avid fan. He was more conniving than Hannibal gave him credit for if he could accomplish such a sophisticated manipulation, especially during a period of psychosis. And this wasn't the first time, was it? Hobbs took a real shine to him. Weaponized empathy and a beguiling face were a potent combination.

And what of the dragon's plea? Desire urged one thing, reason another. The poor fool saw the wiser path and approved of it yet took the wrong. Hannibal felt for him, but his request was not so simple.

Will groaned, still unconscious, voice low and slurred. "D?"

D. A moniker, Will's ploy to humanize himself in the dragon's eyes. Very smart. The nickname didn't rankle in the least. Yet how vexing that *D* had Hannibal's name and address while Hannibal did not have his. He put away his book and leaned forward as Will stirred, holding the scalpel concealed in his pocket.

"Hannibal," Will's eyes were half lidded. His smile was even on both sides—no sign of stroke. Ever since he'd confessed his attempted murder of Freddy Lounds, his countenance

had acquired a strange luminance. It was amplified by the firelight and the way the tips of his hair dried and curled on his forehead. He winced and groaned again. “Did I hit my head?”

So, he didn’t remember the encounter with his D. How fortunate.

“I don’t know. You only just arrived.” Their knees brushed as Hannibal sat next to him and palpated the back of his skull. Will hissed and screwed up his face when he found a lump. Hannibal pressed around the spot for a few seconds longer than necessary, playing the instrument of Will’s pain. There was no blood. “Let’s put some ice on it.”

Will was wiping the rain off his glasses when Hannibal returned from the kitchen. He allowed Hannibal to hold the ice to the back of his head. “I went to the arboretum today.”

“Oh?”

Will turned to him, face inches away, no glasses to shield his expression. Firelight reflected in his irises. “He’s eating them.”

A thrill of anticipation. He’d wondered when this day would come. “Who’s eating what?”

“The Ripper is eating his surgical trophies.” He looked down sheepishly, as if admitting a personal shortcoming. If he was horrified, he hid it well. Hannibal’s breath caught at the sight of his eyelashes, the crease between his eyebrows, his rueful frown. He made a note to hide his copy of *Larousse Gastronomique*.

“How do you know?”

Will explained how stomach acid could get into the lungs after death. Better to remove them beforehand.

“I’m so close to him,” he mumbled. “When I close my eyes, it’s like I can reach out and touch him.” He flexed his right hand, as if his skin remembered what his mind did not.

“Have you told Agent Crawford?”

“Not yet. I guess I should.” Will pressed his head into Hannibal’s ice and examined the ceiling, brow furrowed. He didn’t get up to use the phone.

All the elements of epiphany were present in Will’s mind, bouncing at random with the million other things he knew. No matter what the dragon wished, healing Will would engender the slow recovery of his memories. Their first meal together: the kidney. The dinner party’s liver and tripe. Hannibal had steered them on this course and there was no turning back. He had resolved to end their game before Will struck his bargain with the Tattler and entered protective custody. Their remaining time together was measured in days.

If only Will didn’t suffer so beautifully. Hannibal could hold his shadow in the Elysium of his memory palace forever, but he couldn’t hurt him there. There’d be no fresh stab of agony written across his face, nor the springtime of his smile when Hannibal cured his pain. Will would never describe to him how he felt after shooting Evelda Drumgo and her four accomplices. He’d never see Will covered in blood in the moonlight.

Where does the difference between the past and the future lie? The laws of science do not distinguish between the past and the future, and yet there is a large difference between them in ordinary life. A teacup, shattered on the floor, will never rise and gather itself back up again. The increase in entropy distinguishes the past and the future, giving a direction to time.

Yet Hannibal wanted the shattered teacup to come together. He wanted the expanding universe to stop, for entropy to mend itself, for Mischa, eaten, to be whole again.

Picturing this, another path unfolded before him, riskier than his current course. It would require sacrifice on both their parts, and with a single mistake Will might die anyway. He imagined Will as the dragon had described. *He treated me like family*. Hannibal grappled with hideous want. Against his will an unknown power made him weak.

Cupido et Mens. Desire and Reason. Could he betray himself to save this man?

"My head feels better, thanks."

Hannibal pulled away to return the ice to the fridge. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"I'd take some whiskey if you have it."

He poured two fingers of single malt for each of them. They sat in companionable silence, Will staring into the fire, Hannibal pretending to read as he listened to Will breathe.

Could he be satisfied with only two more nights like this?

No.

Hannibal had never been good at self-denial. If he had to orchestrate Will's Fall to get what he wanted, then so be it.

Tuesday, October 4th, 1983

Will couldn't sleep.

He'd sat with Hannibal in the living room until one am, quite late for a surgeon with inpatient rounds at six am the next day. He'd retired at the same time as Hannibal out of politeness, but he wasn't tired in the slightest. The numbers went up on the alarm clock. 1:30. 2:00. 2:30.

It was three am when Will realized he'd forgotten his office hours yesterday. It was just as well, as he hadn't graded the essays anyway. A disappointed Julie Pierce appeared before him, more upsetting to Will than any reprimand from Chilton or threat from Lounds. Might as well do some work if he was awake. He searched for the papers in his bag.

He pulled out the Tooth Fairy case file instead. Numbness shot up his right side as he experienced a frisson of recognition. An undefined face came to mind: blond, Anglo-Saxon,

reconstructed cleft lip, a fiery pair of eyes. Where had he seen him before? A police sketch? He paged through the file for the umpteenth time as if searching for a photo of the man.

Again, there were the pictures of the crime scene, Mrs. Sherman's diary, their photo album, their purchase history. Here was the list of their possessions: golf bags, hunting bows, power tools, camping gear, a Nikon camera, a Bolex Super Eight movie camera and projector. Toys for adults. Christ, they had so much *stuff*. Will, who owned almost nothing except basic fishing equipment, a Chevy beater, and a typewriter that had been seized by the FBI as evidence, felt a slight animosity and wondered why.

Is this what Mrs. Sherman had wanted from marriage? Had she truly been happy? Again, Will found himself wishing he could see them while they were alive. Then he saw on their list of possessions: one home video.

It was a four-hour drive to Pittsburgh. The night sky had just lightened to dark gray when he pulled into the Shermans' driveway. The police had left orange seals on the doors to make sure no one disturbed the crime scene. Will was pleased to see the padlock on the side entrance had not been replaced. He cut the seal with his hunting knife and entered the house.

A company had cleaned up the blood and replaced the carpets upstairs, but the estate manager hadn't yet cleared out the Shermans' possessions. That was good. Will opened the closets. There were the golf clubs, the camping tent, the hunting bow, and the quiver of arrows—now empty, arrows having been stuck into Mrs. Sherman. In the den there was a 25" color console TV and a shelf of tapes, including the home video. Will pulled it out of its green box and put it in the VHS.

The title, *The New House*, was spelled out in pennies on a shirt cardboard above a broken piggy bank. It opened with Mr. Sherman pulling up the "For Sale" sign in the front yard. He held it up and faced the camera with an embarrassed grin. His pockets were turned out.

An unsteady long shot of Mrs. Sherman and her two children on the front steps. A cut to a swimming pool. Twelve-year-old Elizabeth Sherman, sleek-headed and small, padded around the diving board leaving wet footprints on the tile. Mrs. Sherman in the water held the ladder and looked up at the camera. Her curly black hair had the gloss of a pelt, her bosom swelling shining wet above her suit, her legs wavy below the surface, scissoring.

A birthday party. The Shermans seated around a dining table. They sang silently. Will lip-read "Haaappy Birth-day to you."

Eight-year-old Christopher Sherman sat at the end of the table with the cake in front of him. The candles reflected in his glasses.

Around the corner his sister was watching him as he blew out the candles.

Will shifted in his seat.

Now Mrs. Sherman brought out a large, wrapped box with a lid. Christopher Sherman opened the box and the head of a border collie puppy popped out, wearing her pink bow. Shock and

tears as Christopher mouthed words to his mother. “Can we really keep her?” Her dark hair brushed his shoulders as she leaned over him for a hug.

The mad dash from the dining room to the backyard. They used the side entrance, padlock dangling from the latch. A wide angle shot of the backyard, the border collie chasing a stick thrown by her new master.

The film ended. Will rewound the tape and watched it again.

There was Mrs. Sherman, object of the Tooth Fairy’s desire.

There was the border collie. It hadn’t worn a collar in a neighborhood full of dogs, yet the Tooth Fairy had known it belonged to the Shermans.

There was the inside of the side entrance door.

There was the outside of the side entrance door, with the padlock. The door was not visible from the main road, yet the Tooth Fairy had brought a bolt cutter.

There was the backyard, spacious and enclosed.

Everything the Tooth Fairy had needed to know was on the tape. It hadn’t been shown in public, there wasn’t any film club or film festival…

Will looked at the green box the tape came in. The Shermans’ name and address were on it. And Gateway Film Laboratory, St. Louis, Mo. 63102, with a phone number.

Hm. It was worth investigating.

He drove around Pittsburgh until he found a payphone. It was a long wait until 10 am—central time zone business hours. He called Gateway.

“Hello, I’m Agent Jack Crawford of the FBI. Could you put me through to your head of human resources, please?”

The customer service agent was terrified. “What is this about?”

“I can’t tell you that, ma’am. We’re working against the clock here, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Yes, sir, right away.”

The head of human resources was dumb founded. “You’re looking for one man out of our thousand employees? I’m sorry, but even if I could fax you all their personal information, it would take weeks.”

“How about I give you a description? He’ll be around six-foot-two, blond, weightlifter, may have a facial deformity, possibly a reconstructed cleft lip. He’ll have taken some time off work surrounding Wednesday, September 28th. He would’ve put the request in abruptly.”

“Oh, God.” The man paused. “Don’t tell my manager I told you this, but that sounds like Dolarhyde.”

“Does Dolarhyde have a first name?”

“Francis.”

“Do you have his address and phone number on record?”

Will wrote down the information and thanked the man before hanging up. This was where he should call Crawford. He rubbed the phone number he’d written down with his thumb. It wasn’t a good idea, but he was curious.

He called Dolarhyde’s residence, but it didn’t go through. Interesting. He used Dolarhyde’s area code to call directory assistance.

“How can I help you?”

“Hello, could you look up an address for me?” He recited Dolarhyde’s address and waited for the operator to page through a book.

“Let’s see. That’s an old nursing home. Hasn’t been in business for decades now.”

“Do you have a phone number for it?”

The operator recited the one on file at Gateway.

“Thank you. Could you provide me with the numbers of some local real estate agents?”

None of the agents in the area were aware if the nursing home was on the market, though one go-getter had a personal gripe with the resident.

“It’s a gorgeous Victorian-era mansion, but the owner doesn’t maintain it at all. A driveway lined with dead trees, peeling paint, rotting wood. I keep leaving flyers in the mailbox, but he never calls.”

“Are you familiar with the owner?”

“I saw him once when we were children. I’ll never forget that face. He looked more like a leaf-nosed bat than a boy.” She shuddered. “His grandmother was awful too. She used to take him canvassing for local politicians she didn’t like. Cost Howard Vogt an election one year.”

At this point Will had a walloping headache. How had he gotten here? He struggled to keep his line of reasoning straight. Examining his last quarter, he wondered if it was worth calling Crawford at all. In the end, he did.

Crawford picked up on the eighth ring. “Hello?”

“It’s Will Graham. I think I have a lead on the Tooth Fairy.”

“That’s what I like to hear. What have you got?”

“I watched a home video from the Shermans’. It had everything the Tooth Fairy would’ve needed to break into their house, no casing necessary. So, I called the video company. They have an employee that fits the profile perfectly.”

He wasn’t met with jubilation. “Back up. You were in the Sherman house?”

“Yep. I’m calling you from a payphone in Pittsburgh.”

“Did the police bring you there?”

“No, sir.”

“Why didn’t you get permission before going?”

“I didn’t think about it.”

“Are you aware of the paperwork required to break the seal on a crime scene?” Crawford swore.

“Tell me about the suspect.”

“He’s based in St. Louis-”

“You’re calling to tell me that the Chesapeake Ripper lives in Missouri?”

“They’re not the same person, sir.”

“You read Dacre’s file. The tongue belonged to Mrs. Sherman.”

“Yes, sir. I don’t know how the Ripper got ahold of Mrs. Sherman’s tongue.”

“Are you suggesting that the Tooth Fairy and the Ripper know each other?”

“...I think it’s likely, sir.”

That was not the answer Crawford wanted to hear. “Write up a report and fax it to my office, Graham. It’ll save me the time I’m about to waste telling the Pittsburgh police about the grad student who broke into their crime scene.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but-”

“Don’t you understand how bad this looks? The only reason I’m not booking you is because we need your help to run the Tattler article tomorrow. Did Freddy Lounds tell you about that?”

Will’s gut went queasy. “Is that your plan?”

“It’s a damn sight better than flying to Missouri to rough up a random man you found on the back of a VHS. We can’t force you to comply, but it’s the best shot we have at reeling the

Ripper in before a body drops on Saturday. Have you thought about it?"

"I haven't."

"The Tattler prints tomorrow night and is distributed Thursday morning. I need your answer soon."

Crawford sounded so angry. Was he going to book Will if he said no? He tried to remember why he'd thought that the man in St. Louis was the Tooth Fairy. He felt silly for going through all that effort just to cause trouble.

Then he thought of the other article, the one Lounds had threatened to print if he refused.

"I'll do it."

Pliant Wax

Wednesday, October 5th, 1983

They gathered in the Mount Vernon apartment the FBI had chosen as Will's safehouse. Lounds was almost tolerable, his demeanor improved by Crawford's presence. He greeted him with manners Will hadn't known he possessed and sat in a corner with his tape recorder and notepad, his dull toad face kindled with rare excitement.

After another sleepless night, Will was having trouble remembering who he was or how he'd gotten here. But he knew he was angry. Angry at what? He paced between the desk and the large picture window, eyes fixed on Lounds.

Crawford was steadfast, though he regarded both Will and Lounds with skepticism. "Alright, Graham. Let her rip."

"What?"

A concerned look. "Give us your assessment of the Ripper."

Will started by laying out his original theories, including his worldview, surgical skill, and knowledge of art theory and classical literature.

"These are sounding like compliments," Crawford said. "We need something that'll hurt him."

Haltingly, Will described the Ripper's upbringing at the hands of incestuous back-country hicks who never loved him.

"The Ripper's acts indicate a projected delusional scheme that compensates for feelings of inadequacy. Ashamed of his lack of education and culture, he aspires to aesthetic sensibility by cribbing from old masters, mistaking his murders for works of art. Mentally, he hasn't progressed past his childhood compulsion to mutilate small animals."

A pause.

"The laughingstock of his acquaintances, the Ripper is ugly and impotent with persons of the opposite sex. He molests his male victims, yet has an unconscious homosexual conflict, a terrible fear of being gay. His oral fixation with the masculine body culminates in the impulse to eat their organs, hence the surgical trophies."

He lost steam there, distracted by pigeons flying past the gridded windowpane.

"A queer cannibal? Nice, that's a good angle. Tell me more about his letter to you," Lounds prompted, still scribbling on his notepad.

“He’s obsessed with me, thinks I’m the only one who can understand his mental illness. He tells himself that this obsession is love, but he isn’t capable of loving. Rather, he seeks to fill the void left by his father, with whom he was sexually obsessed.” It was difficult to get his mouth around the words. “He’s one of those pitiful things that are born in hospitals from time to time. They feed it, and keep it warm, but they don’t put it on the machine and it dies. I feel sorry for him.”

“How do you think you’ll catch him?”

“The Ripper is bound to make a mistake at some point. He has certain disadvantages.”

“What are those?”

“He’s insane.”

Will was suddenly very tired. He complained that he had a headache, retreated to the desk chair, and fell silent. Neither Lounds nor Crawford could get him to say more.

Crawford took over. He said Will would provide the Tattler with more observations and insights about the killer as they occurred to him. Most law enforcement people would disagree with him, but as long as Will was consulting for the Ripper case, the Tattler could count on getting the straight stuff from him.

The key to Will’s investigation was his “Baltimore hideaway” which he “had borrowed to use until he squashed the Ripper” and where he stayed up late at night studying case files.

They concluded the meeting with a photoshoot. Will sat at the desk, looking at a grotesque “artist’s conception” of the Ripper. Behind him was a clear view of the Washington Monument and the Marquis de Lafayette statue. If the Ripper wanted to find him, he could. In the last photo, Lounds and Will shook hands in front of the desk. For whatever reason, he placed his other hand on Lounds’s shoulder. He did not smile.

“Pleasure doing business,” Lounds smirked as he packed his things.

Crawford drove him back. Even with eyes closed, Will could feel his unease.

“You feeling alright, Graham?”

“Right as rain, sir.”

“We need you focused tomorrow. You remember your route?”

“Uh huh.” Will did not remember his route.

“Every night at 7:15 you’ll turn left out of the flat, cross the traffic circle, head east, and enter the Peabody Library. It’s a two-minute walk. You’ll wait one hour and then come back the same way. The walk is probably where it will happen, if it happens. Got it?”

The Peabody Library was where he’d first discussed the Ripper with Hannibal. It seemed a fitting location for an ending.

“Yep.”

“Did they brief you on the Kevlar vest?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you have any questions?”

“No, sir.”

“I feel like you’re not taking this seriously. You know your life's on the line?”

Will’s headache peaked in intensity, like a bucket of hammers being tossed down a metal stairwell in his mind. “Yes, sir.”

“Have you been drinking? Be honest.”

“No, but maybe I should start.”

Crawford didn’t argue with that. “Normally I’d never consider asking a civilian to do something like this, but I have confidence in you, Graham. It’s a brave thing you’re doing and if it catches us the Ripper, you’ll have saved lives. Now’s the time to bear down.”

A pep talk. Crawford was a leader, with a leader’s frank-and-open bullshit, alright.

“Thanks, sir.”

“Call me Jack.”

Will looked out the passenger window, wished he had a gun, and beared down hard.

His things had scattered unreasonably far across Hannibal’s townhouse in the eight days he’d lived there. It took an hour to find all his notes and papers. He spent an embarrassingly long time in Hannibal’s study, looking over his bookshelves, his sketches, and just sitting in his leather chair. He went out on the patio. Ship masts on the Patapsco sailed over the rooftops. He remembered the fisherman who’d offered him a job in Alaska. It was sounding better by the minute.

At the bottom of his shoulder bag, he found Chilton’s watch, the gold detailing even more obnoxious in his somber mood. He would need it to time his daily walks to the Peabody. Dutifully, he put it on.

When he finished packing, he trundled his suitcase to his truck. With terrible timing, Hannibal pulled up in his Bentley. It was only four.

“You’re home early.”

“A patient canceled his operation. I’m on call.” Hannibal looked at Will’s suitcase and the watch on his wrist. “I thought you were staying.”

“I am,” Will lied, feeling greasy as old currency. “We got a lead on the Tooth Fairy. Crawford wants me on a plane in an hour.”

Hannibal’s attention clicked and whirred, pinning Will to a microscope stage. “Where are you going?”

“St. Louis.”

“When will you be back?”

“I’m not sure.” *Not until we catch him.*

Will studied a leaf on the sidewalk, hiding behind his glasses. Hannibal smelled a rat. But Will couldn’t tell the truth because the truth meant goodbye, probably forever. Goodbye to esoteric chats over whiskey, to bafflingly unconditional acceptance, and to coming home to a man so painfully handsome it sometimes made Will angry to look at him if he was being honest. So instead, he said, “Thanks for everything. Next time you see Alana, could you give her my best?”

“Of course.”

Will hefted the suitcase into the truck then opened the door to get in.

“Wait.” Hannibal took off his cashmere scarf—dark navy and emerald plaid—and wrapped it around Will’s neck. It smelled like amber and antiseptic. “Remember to eat and stay warm.”

“I don’t think it’s cold in St. Louis.”

He made the mistake of looking into Hannibal’s eyes. They stung with disappointment. *Coward*, they said. He couldn’t meet them for long.

“Are they giving you a gun?”

“I don’t think they trust me with one.”

Hannibal nodded and clasped Will’s hand in his. “Then good luck. I’ll see you soon.”

“You too.”

Thursday, October 6th, 1983

Hannibal was at a newsstand as soon as it opened to purchase a copy of the Tattler. He brought it back to his study to read.

TOP SLEUTH REVEALS LURID SECRETS: RIPPER IMPOTENT.

The article was more or less what he’d expected. Stupid, ugly, gay, insane: slander couched in clinical terminology. The only truly creative dig—the assertion that he had a negative

Oedipus Complex—was too absurd to take seriously. If anything, he'd envisioned worse. The most surprising part was the public announcement of his cannibalism.

One of those pitiful things that are born in hospitals from time to time…

If only the Tattler hadn't claimed that *Will* thought these things. It was unreasonable to feel betrayed as Will hadn't had a choice. Hannibal wasn't bothered in the slightest, his ego not reliant on conventional reinforcement. Still, he wished the lies had come from the mouth of Chilton or Crawford. They had sold Will as a parrot to a tabloid rag, and now they were feeding him as carrion to the dragon.

A picture of Will's "hideaway," not so well hidden. Will's corduroy blazer and threadbare jeans. Hannibal wished that the FBI had the budget to improve his wardrobe as well as his living arrangement. It was satisfying to see him with his own desk in a spacious flat. Hannibal had considered apartments in that neighborhood when he'd first moved to Baltimore. He'd chosen Fell's Point for its proximity to the hospital and Little Italy, but he wouldn't mind moving if Will preferred Mount Vernon Square.

A picture of Will shaking Freddy Lounds's hand and trying not to be sick. The cleanest picture of Will's face in the issue. Hannibal carried it over to his bookcase and set it under the first ray of morning light. He held a finger to his lips, considering.

In his memory palace, he walked down the nave of the Duomo di Firenze. The Tattler was propped up on the altar, candlelit before the monumental crucifix. Will's hollow eyes grimaced below the headline as his voice rang throughout the sanctuary, accompanied by a choir.

With great planning and intention, the Ripper creates divine aesthetic order from the disorder of life. Through him, swine are transformed into works of art. Catching him doesn't feel like serving justice, it feels like gnawing at my own leg.

In his study, Hannibal stood still as a statue, eyes closed, head tilted as if catching the strains of a distant melody. Dawn swept over the newsprint as the hour of his inpatient rounds approached.

After Will had told him about Freddy Lounds, Hannibal had made a phone call during which he'd acquired a very interesting address. *I have to catch Federal Express with the package in about five minutes, and I'd hate to bother him about it at home because he told Linda to send it and I don't want her to get in hot water. It's right there in her Rolodex or whatever. I'll dance at your wedding if you read it to me…*

At his desk, he typed the address and folded it into a neat square. Then he headed east toward the Harbor Point overlook. He sat on a bench, crossed his legs, and watched the progress of the sunrise across the water.

It wasn't long before the dragon joined him.

"Good morning," Hannibal said politely.

“Is Will really at that place?”

“I expect he is. Why? Have you changed your mind about killing him?”

“Did he actually say those things about you?” The dragon did not hide his amusement.

Hannibal went away for a moment. He thought of something else—Géricault’s anatomical studies for *The Raft of the Medusa*—and when he returned, he said, “He spoke under duress, but we have a larger issue. Will is in protective custody, where members of law enforcement will notice his symptoms and bring him to a hospital. We have to end their ruse before that happens.”

The dragon saw the problem at once. For him, Will Graham in protective custody meant the end of their—whatever it was they shared.

“There is a way to get him back.” Hannibal held out the address.

He read it over. “You want me to pay this man a visit?”

“I would go myself, but I’m not as free an agent as you, and the job seems better suited to your skill set.”

“What happens to Will afterward?”

“With proof that their plan has failed, the FBI will release Will unto me.”

“He returns to his slow death?”

“He is mortal. Whether he lives or dies, God’s will sees to that.”

The dragon growled. “Promise you’ll save him.”

Hannibal always kept his promises. Before answering, he conducted an ontological negotiation.

He intended to destroy Will. Yet, though everything must change, nothing perishes. The moving soul may pass from beast to human body and again to that of a beast, but is always the same spirit. As pliant wax is molded to new forms and does not keep the selfsame form yet is the selfsame wax, could he mold Will yet keep his soul intact? In short, could Will be saved if he became something else?

The sun rose another inch before he said, “I promise.”

“Then I’ll do it.” Before the dragon had walked five paces, he turned back. “How do I know you aren’t setting me up?”

“If the police are waiting for you there, simply tell them who the Chesapeake Ripper is. Your capture is possibly the last thing I want, after Will’s death.”

Satisfied, the dragon left to complete his dread business.

Friday, October 7th, 1983

Will spun round and round in the desk chair, the floodlit Washington Monument marking each rotation. The sun was setting, which meant it was almost time for his second walk to the Peabody Library and back. Yesterday's walk had been uneventful, as this one and the one tomorrow would be until another body was discovered Sunday morning. A waste of government time and taxpayer money.

The Ripper would not fall for this shoddy trap. He wouldn't kill Will with a quick knife to the neck or shot to the face. He would wait to get Will alone and cut him slowly, sipping his pain at close quarters. This he knew, though he didn't know much else. What was left of Will Graham was fading fast.

The Kevlar vest hung on the back of the door. He regarded it without comprehension. At 6:40, he donned his hunting jacket and wrapped Hannibal's scarf around his neck. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and looked through himself, past himself, like he was a stranger. He didn't put on the vest before leaving the apartment.

The black dragon Ladon padded beside him, mouth open and growling flame. Will appreciated the company. Baltimore was lonely at night.

He crossed the traffic circle but headed south toward a convenience store instead of east. Crawford had given him a couple twenties in case of an emergency, and he used one now to buy a pack of Marlboros. He smoked outside of the shop. The nicotine didn't do much to soothe his frayed nerves, but he felt sharper.

Under the scarf, the Ripper's hands slid over his warm throat. They felt the blood pumping there and squeezed. It made him dizzy. Ladon nuzzled his hand for him to pat his snout.

When he reached the butt of the cigarette, he lit another. He forgot why, but he was vaguely aware that he had to be out of the apartment for an hour before coming back. He stopped by a pharmacy to pick up some Bufferin then strolled through a nearby park, measuring the time in cigarettes. Their tips glowed whenever he pulled from them, shedding dim red light on his face. A small beacon in the dark.

The path was enveloped in shadow, enclosed by shrubs on either side. Jittery with excitement, his hand holding the cigarette shook. He listened for footsteps. His breaths came quick.

Any moment now. It could happen any moment.

But nothing happened. He was on his sixth cigarette before he turned around.

Crawford was at the apartment when he returned. But it wasn't really Crawford. The man wore Crawford's face, but he had been replaced with someone else.

"What the hell are you doing, Graham?"

Will sank back into the desk chair and stared at the ceiling. If he ignored Crawford's double, he might go away.

"I don't blame you for cracking under the pressure," the double said. "I don't like walking around in a Kevlar vest with my butt puckered up either. But you're in it now. You can't go home as long as he's loose."

"Then I'm never going home. This plan is bullshit. You're never going to catch him, *Jack*."

It was the worst thing he could have said.

"I didn't hear that," the double barked. "Why didn't you follow the route?"

Will shrugged.

"Why didn't you wear the vest?"

"The what?"

The double was enraged. Will laughed.

"I'm not in a joking mood. The body armor. Graham?"

Will leaned forward. His voice dripped with disdain. "Look at you, your face is all puffed up. Letting your frustration and anger get to you. Feel like killing me yet?"

He almost got a black eye for that, but then Crawford looked harder. He saw Will's unsteady movements, confused gaze, the way he struggled to speak, and the fear buried under his bravado. He thought of his late wife, Bella, and recognized some of the symptoms from her final months.

He pulled the Kevlar vest from its hanger and set it on the desk.

"Do you recognize this?"

Graham looked at it, suspicious. "Is this a trick?"

At this juncture, Crawford had to make a choice. He thought of the dozens of agents posted outside of this apartment. He thought of Cassie Boyle. He thought of the Shermans and families across the country like the Shermans. He thought of the Ripper, of the untold numbers he had killed, and those he would kill in the future. Then he looked at Graham. He hardly recognized him, so far was he removed from the surly grad student he'd met at Heimlich's retirement party.

"Do you have a family? Anyone waiting for you when you get home?"

"Just me, myself, and I. Same as you."

The decision weighed heavily on Crawford as he said, "You have a nice night, Graham. We'll try again tomorrow."

“G’night.”

Crawford left him spinning in the desk chair. He turned out the apartment lights before he locked the door and walked back to his car.

Blood-Brain Barrier

Saturday, October 8th, 1983

The doorbell rang. Will got up from the desk chair he'd spun in all night to answer it. He opened the door to an ashen-faced Crawford holding a folder. Will was pleased to see that it was the actual Crawford and not the double he'd spoken to yesterday.

"Please, come in."

The apartment was sparsely furnished. Besides the desk and the bed, there was a single folding chair. Crawford solemnly took a seat in it. It was a while before he spoke.

"In all my years, I've never been this blind-sided. The Ripper struck again last night someplace we never thought he'd look."

Will feigned shock. "Where?"

"Chicago. He took out the Lounds family, the same way he did the Shermans."

Will considered what reaction would be most appropriate. It probably wasn't: *Oh, really? How interesting! Is that the case file there? Can I see it?* He settled on, "Damn."

"Freddy's father, stepmother, and three half-siblings. Their dog too. Found it in the woods out back, throat cut. We're looking into how he might have gotten their address. They were a high-profile family so they didn't spread it around."

Will recalled Rob Lounds's groundbreaking journalism on himself. Truly a loss to the nation. "Same gun, mirror shards, and attention paid to Mrs. Lounds?"

"Yes, but he was in a hurry this time. Smashed a window to get in and had to shoot Mr. Lounds in the living room. One of the kids made it to the patio before he got them. No display of Mrs. Lounds either."

So it was the Tooth Fairy, not the Ripper.

"Even less inspired than the Shermans, like it's a chore for him already. Maybe he was tired after driving twelve hours from Baltimore." Will looked out the window. "Or maybe he's in a hurry to return."

"To get back to you?"

"Possibly."

"Do you think he did it for you?"

"In a way, yes."

“The article was a mistake. We’re pulling you out.”

“Washing your hands of me?”

“The Bureau won’t leave you with nothing. I can get you a new birth certificate and social security number. We’ll help you relocate. Keep your head down and he’ll have no way to find you.”

Will felt at peace. This is what he had predicted. Now that the time had come, he found that he wasn’t so attached to this life. He’d been searching for a way out for a while now. His only regret was his stilted goodbye to Hannibal. He deserved better.

“Is there anywhere you’d like to live?” Crawford hesitated. “We can set you up at a hospital in the Boston area. They have some of the best doctors in the country there.”

Cars drove in and out of the traffic circle, round and round in the perpetual rhythm of city life. “I’d like to go to Dutch Harbor, Alaska. Unless the airfare is more than the Bureau can afford.”

Crawford paused like he wanted to say something, but he held his tongue. “I think we can cover a few flights.”

Will threw his clothes in his suitcase and followed Crawford out.

A fist punched him in the jaw as soon as he stepped outside. Blood filled his mouth. Another punch split his lip. He was knocked to the ground, and someone was choking him.

Crawford and three other officers dragged a kicking Freddy Lounds off Will.

“You cunt, you set me up! Cunt knew what he would do and let me go through with it. Arrest him—it’s Graham’s fault!” His shouts sounded wet. He’d been crying. “He planned it with the Ripper!”

Will licked the blood off his lips. Tangy. He didn’t know what Lounds was talking about, but his pain was fantastic. Exquisite anger and grief crashed over him. “Planned what?”

“Bastard. I’m going to kill you, I swear!” Lounds struggled in Crawford’s grip.

“Easy, Lounds. Not in front of the FBI.” Will got up and let an officer lead him to a van, finding it difficult to look away from the spectacle. “Say goodbye to Chilton for me.”

Will held his feral gaze in the side view mirror until they turned a corner.

The officer didn’t say much during the drive, nor did he offer Will a towel to clean his mouth. Blood oozed down the side of his chin. He didn’t know where they were going until they stopped in front of Chilton’s house.

“Pack up the last of your belongings.” The officer passed him some cardboard boxes and packing tape. “We’ll have everything shipped to your destination.”

The officer chose to wait in the van. Will appreciated the privacy.

There wasn't much else in the basement: some books, his quilt, and his cork fly stand. Most of the papers were trash now, since he had no intention of finishing his thesis. He left the essays, still ungraded, on the writing table. Damn if it was special treatment, but he crossed out Pierce's F and gave her full marks.

He went to empty his wastebasket, exiting the basement through the side entrance and walking toward the trash bins in the laneway. He stopped to admire the foliage and wondered if the maples in Alaska turned red or yellow in the fall. Then he noticed a fallen maple branch, two inches thick, laying on the lawn. The cut was clean, made by a hand tool.

Will didn't know why, but it felt like a bad omen. Commanded by an unknown force, he looked up at the canopy, then hefted himself onto the lower limbs. He climbed twenty feet before finding where the branch had been cut. It created an opening in the leaves large enough for a clear view of the side entrance, the basement windows, and the breakfast nook. A soda can was crushed into the bark. A symbol was carved on the trunk and stained with blood. Where had he seen it before?

He sat and looked at the basement door. It was a comfortable seat. He could imagine spending quite some time up here. But he had to finish packing, so he climbed down, emptied his wastebasket, and got to work.

He was almost finished when a brisk knock came from the door.

"Just a minute. I'll meet you out front," Will called. He had to go upstairs to leave Chilton's watch on his desk.

"Will." It was Hannibal, sounding distraught. "I've been looking for you everywhere. Please, let me in."

He'd never heard Hannibal so agitated. There had to be an emergency. Will reached for the doorknob, but something stopped him. Hadn't he told Hannibal that he'd be in St. Louis?

"What is it?"

"I got a phone call from Alana. I think she's in danger."

"What happened?"

"She said she thought someone was in her apartment and then the call cut out."

It was a lie. Alana would've called the police in that scenario.

"Did you call the police?"

"Yes, but I saw the news. I wanted to make sure you were alright. Can I come in?"

Will's gut twisted. His instinct was to reassure Hannibal, but then he thought of the mark carved on the maple outside. Surgical skill, art theory, and classical literature. A gourmand

with a fondness for offal. A fast friend with whom he had nothing in common. *It's beautiful in its own way, giving voice to the unmentionable: that there can be a man so bad that killing him would feel good.*

Had this been Hannibal's plan from the moment Alana introduced them at the party? Ah, yes, he hadn't apologized after spilling her drink. Very rude. A criminal psychologist as well—novel. Hannibal had fattened him up and now he'd come for the slaughter. Will deserved it, in a way.

The question was, what did Will owe him in return? If the greatest kindness you'd ever received had been given with ill intent, did that make it worthless? In that moment, Will found that he could be somebody's friend without receiving their friendship in return. He touched the cashmere scarf at his neck. It demanded reciprocity, even if it had been a lie.

"Will?"

"You don't have to pretend anymore. I know."

Silence.

"It's ok. I'm not going to tell anyone."

More silence.

"They're giving me a new name. I'm going far, far away, and I'm never coming back. It'll be just as if you killed me, though not as fun." He couldn't help but smile at that.

More silence. Act over, Hannibal wouldn't spare a crumb of false affection. Will wasn't worthy. Never had been. Well, that was alright.

"Goodbye, Hannibal."

"Will." A whisper. Will leaned closer to hear if he said more.

It took less than a second. The metallic rumble of a key in the doorknob, then the door slammed into him, hitting his forehead full force and knocking him over. He skidded across the cement floor, scraping his elbows and palms as he tried to catch himself.

Then Hannibal was on him. He grabbed Will's scarf in one hand and held a white cloth in the other. Chloroform, like he'd used on Dacre. It was Saturday. He was going to be the Ripper's Sunday morning drop.

"Who hit you?" Hannibal asked.

"Lounds." Will tried and failed to flip them over.

"Ah. My congratulations on your revenge."

"Not mine. Yours."

Will didn't have the strength to fight him off, so he stopped trying. He let Hannibal press down on his neck. With both hands, Will grabbed the wrist holding the chloroform and used Hannibal's momentum to pull it closer to his mouth. If he could bite Hannibal's radial artery and spill enough blood, Crawford might catch him. Not in time to save Will but maybe the next victim. It's hard to clean blood out of cement—Hannibal might not have enough time before someone came to check on him.

Hannibal tsked and pulled his wrist away, redoubling the pressure on Will's throat. It was difficult to compress his carotid arteries completely through the padding of the scarf. That gave Will a few extra seconds of consciousness to scramble for a weapon, though his hands met with nothing. He tried to kick, but Hannibal sat too far forward on his chest, holding his shoulders down with his knees.

Hannibal bore down on his windpipe until Will stopped kicking. "Shh, I don't want you to feel any pain. Put your head back, close your eyes, and wade into the quiet of the stream."

"Care-ful," Will choked. "Your hand-spread." The scarf would help, but Hannibal might still leave an incriminating six-fingered bruise.

"Thank you, Will. I'm always careful."

Will scraped at Hannibal's coat with his fingernails, scratching for DNA, fibers, something. Hannibal would scrub his body clean of evidence, but maybe some trace would fall to the floor. He reached up, thinking to pull Hannibal's hair, but he ended up brushing his cheek. He wasn't thinking clearly. Not enough oxygen.

"I regret that it came to this, but every game must have its ending. I admire your courage."

One last look into Hannibal's eyes. Amongst many unfathomable emotions, there was ecstasy. From a utilitarian perspective, Will's death might be a net positive if Hannibal derived this much enjoyment from it. He allowed Hannibal's pleasure to wash through him, a strange anesthesia as the white cloth covered his mouth.

***

Hannibal was fascinated by the uninhibited mind. The true story of human nature was revealed when stripped of higher-level executive functions like shame or logic. People were little more than animals underneath the artifice of good habits and manners. He had looked forward to meeting the beast inside Will, but it hadn't appeared in Chilton's basement. Oh, well. Another time.

He applauded Will's feverish performance of conflicting drives. With so little left of himself, he'd been lucid enough to piece together Hannibal's identity and say a proper farewell, sparing no thought to danger. He'd been so quiet. Without so much as a shout for help, he'd fought himself more than he'd fought Hannibal, and had ultimately chosen Hannibal's wellbeing above all else. A compelling show of forgiveness and acceptance. It would have been touching if Will hadn't used the same tactic on Hobbs and the dragon.

Five minutes passed as Hannibal held the chloroform over Will's mouth and waited for it to take effect. Chloroform wasn't nearly as fast acting as Hollywood made it appear. Its application was more drawn out than an injection, best used in intimate locations, like dark arboretums or dingy basements. He maintained pressure on Will's carotid arteries, letting blood pass every so often to limit the risk of brain damage. Will dipped in and out of consciousness, blinking sleepily up at him without control of his body. His split lip bled into the cloth.

When Hannibal let go of Will's throat and he did not regain consciousness, he tied the chloroform-soaked cloth around Will's mouth and nose and cradled him into the backseat of his car, hidden in the laneway. He checked his rearview frequently for police vehicles. There were none.

In Fell's Point, Hannibal carried Will up three flights of stairs to his study and laid him down on a couch. From his bookshelf, he selected his leather-bound *Corpus Hippocraticum*, in which he'd hidden the key to the room behind his desk. He unlocked it now.

This wasn't what Will termed "the Ripper's workshop," but the room had seen many uses over the last six years, primarily food storage in the chest freezer on the far wall. The room was lined floor to ceiling with thick lead sound insulation which prevented the hum of the freezer—and other noises, depending on the day—from reaching the ears of neighbors. The walls had an additional layer of soft padding. A window was visible on this floor from the outside, but he had boarded it up long ago.

The hospital bed and patient monitor were more recent additions. Hannibal lowered the railings and heaved Will onto the bed.

Hannibal removed the scarf he'd given Will from his neck. It was stained with Will's blood—both evidence of the abduction and a precious souvenir. He draped it over the chair.

He stripped Will completely—it would make everything easier. His shoes, coat, and belt went into a cabinet. He folded the shirt, pants, and underwear and set them aside to wash. He draped a hospital blanket over Will's lower body for both warmth and privacy.

He pocketed Chilton's watch to destroy the first chance he got. The stink of the watchband was already filling the room.

Three cardiac leads, a pulse oximeter, and a blood pressure cuff. It had been a while since he'd done this nurse's duty, but he retained the muscle memory. A moment for the readings to stabilize, then the relief of seeing Will's vital signs on the screen. His blood pressure was high but not extremely so. His heart rate was steady.

From what Hannibal had observed over the last few days, Will's bouts of psychosis were becoming less frequent, but he was generally confused, and his motor function had decreased. He had passed from the psychotic phase to the unresponsive phase, the normal progression of autoimmune encephalitis. His blood pressure and heart rate indicated that Hannibal had caught Will before he entered the hyperkinetic phase where severe brain damage can occur. He had only been sick for two weeks. It was still early in the course of the disease.

Will's prognosis was favorable, but tests were required to confirm Hannibal's diagnosis. There were two types of autoimmune encephalitis: one caused by cancer and one caused by pathogenic antibodies. Hannibal couldn't analyze samples in his house. Luckily, Bedelia had recently made a house call to a wealthy, private patient several towns over named "Lloyd Wyman," a perfect double of Will in all but name. She would order tests for any samples Hannibal collected from Will at Johns Hopkins.

He drew several vials of blood, then took a few skin biopsies from Will's arm and dropped them in a specimen jar. These would determine if he had melanoma. The last test would be the most invasive. He was glad Will would be unconscious for it.

He rolled Will onto his side and tucked his legs into the fetal position, flexing his lumbar and expanding his intervertebral spaces. He ran a finger down Will's spine to feel for the L3-L4 interspace. Here it was. He swabbed the site with antiseptic and allowed it to dry. With a 25-gauge needle, he placed a wheel of anesthetic near the surface of Will's skin, then pushed deeper, injecting more along the needle tract.

Now the fun part. He positioned a beveled spinal needle against the insertion site and angled it toward Will's umbilicus. He palpated his iliac crest and spinous process to confirm the location, then pushed into Will. There was a pop as the needle pierced Will's epidural space, then another as it advanced into his subarachnoid. Thin metal connected Hannibal to Will's central nervous system.

He removed the stylet and began drawing Will's cerebrospinal fluid. It was colorless, no trace of blood or bilirubin. Eight mL divided amongst four collection tubes.

The sight affected him more than it should have. He shifted in his seat.

Now he should reinsert the stylet and remove the needle.

Instead, he drew another 10 mL. He held the collection tube, feeling the fluid quickly cool outside of Will's body. Tuna spinal jelly tasted like fresh seawater. What would Will's taste like?

There was no question that Will had a brain disease. It would be foolish to pour the CSF onto his tongue, taste the white blood cells and microproteins that tended to Will's brain, swallow it. He might absorb Will's immunoglobulin into his own system, as antibodies pass from mother to child through breastmilk. Would they jump Hannibal's blood-brain barrier and bind to his NMDA receptors as well? The purest manifestation of folie à deux, madness shared by two. An amusing thought, but he would never try it.

Still, he kept the extra 10 mL along with the rest of the CSF. All samples went into the chest freezer, set at -80 degrees Fahrenheit until he could bring them to the hospital on Monday.

He rolled Will onto his back, raised the bed rails, and prepared the restraints. He had chosen the softest ones he could find: fleece-lined leather cuffs for Will's hands and feet and four straps down the length of Will's body. He would rather use limb restraints only, but today was a special day.

Hannibal untied the chloroform cloth from Will's face and sat back, fingers steepled over the scarf on his knee. Gooseflesh appeared on Will's chest and arms. The ECG pads rose and fell with each breath, matching the respiratory waveform on the monitor. Bruises developed on his throat, a thumbprint on the right side and five fingerprints on the left, just as Will had warned.

It took half an hour for Will to regain consciousness. A slight irregularity in his ECG, then Will sputtered.

"Oh, hell." His voice was hoarse. He cracked a bleary eye. "Han-" He coughed.

Hannibal was there with a glass of water. "Slowly, only a few sips." He swept Will's hair off his forehead as he drank.

Will regarded the padded walls and patient monitor. "Where…?"

"We're at my house."

Will tried to lift his head but was stopped by one of the restraints. Hannibal saw the exact moment when he remembered. His ECG spiked.

"Raspail and Dacre never regained consciousness."

"No, they didn't."

Fascinated, Hannibal watched Will's emotions play out over his face: microexpressions of confusion, fear, nausea, and bitterness. What could he be thinking? That Hannibal would torture him before his death? Did he berate himself for not realizing sooner?

Then Will took a deep breath and looked Hannibal in the eyes. The change was instantaneous. Will didn't move, his expression didn't shift, but he was not the same person. His heartbeat slowed on the monitor. A dilation of the pupils, a flare of nostrils as he sniffed, mouth parted ever so slightly. Hannibal gazed into a reflection of himself and smiled.

"Does this make me the third golden apple?"

"Of course not. You were always the maiden huntress Atalanta, I your Calydonian boar. You did wonderfully, the first to draw blood out of all of Crawford's pack, as I knew you would be. Meritum feres virtutis honorem."

"But you won the footrace."

"Don't look so sad. Like Hippomenes, I had certain advantages, and I was running for your life as well as mine."

"My life as well? How so?"

This was the beginning of Will's test. An inconvenient, but unavoidable hurdle.

“Loss of memory, time, and reality. You described these symptoms to me two weeks ago in the George Peabody Library, but you never sought treatment. In fact, you tried to hide your condition as it worsened. Why?”

Will was silent, but Hannibal didn’t expect an answer.

He parroted Will’s American accent. “*I’m going far, far away, and I’m never coming back.* Talking about yourself like you’re the old family dog. You might as well have told me you were being sent to a farm to play with the horses and chickens. Do you consider me dim? I know what you were planning. You wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere to die—federally-funded euthanasia signed and stamped by Jack Crawford.”

Will’s breath hitched. His heartbeat increased ever so slightly.

“Tell me, what happened in the psychiatric ward down in New Orleans?”

Will tried to shake his head, but it was strapped too tightly to the bed. “Nothing happened.”

“Don’t lie to me. I read all the papers.”

“No, Hannibal. Please.”

“Robert Lounds snuck into your room while you were psychotic. He peeled back your blanket, took pictures, and published them in the Tattler. You were in restraints, much like these, weren’t you? *KILLER COP GOES MAD*, he wrote. What else did Lounds do? The article said you were incoherent, so maybe you don’t remember.”

“No,” Will choked, tearing up.

Exquisite.

“You have nosocomephobia, Will. Fear of hospitalization. I want to help you overcome it.” Hannibal walked to a cabinet and began pulling out supplies. “Think of this as immersion therapy.”

“H-hey, why don’t we skip this and go straight to the carving?” Will was shivering now, breaths short and shallow. “You’ve done an abdomen and a thorax. Why not a c-crani-um?”

“I want you to breathe deeply, like this.” Hannibal breathed in through his mouth, held it for five seconds, then exhaled through his nose. He squeezed Will’s trembling hand, thinking of their embrace the night of the basement flood. Will was calmed by human contact, though it was debatable if Hannibal was an appropriate candidate to provide it anymore.

Will did not squeeze back.

“F-uck-k-off.” The words barely escaped him, so severe was his hyperventilation. He strained against the leather straps and cuffs, but they didn’t budge. Will’s loss of control was fascinating, but tragic in a way. A majestic beast laid low by an arrow in its side.

Hannibal waited several minutes for the panic attack to subside. When Will started gasping at a reasonable rate, he continued.

“Robert Lounds is dead, but you are not. Unlike him, I have your best interests at heart. You have encephalitis and are malnourished. I’m going to start your treatment by administering intravenous immunoglobulin, corticosteroids, and nutrition therapy. I imagine you know what that means.”

Will’s eyes flicked to the IV port on the tray.

“Very good. I’m going to implant this port in your left arm, right here.” Will flinched when he touched the spot. “The catheter will follow your vein all the way to the superior vena cava, just above your heart.”

Hannibal removed Will’s blood pressure cuff, applied the tourniquet, then brought out an ultrasound machine to locate Will’s basilic vein and median nerve.

“Normally the patient is sedated for this procedure to reduce the risk of complications, but we don’t have an anaesthesiologist on hand. You’ll need to hold still. Can you do that?”

Will let out an animalistic sound as Hannibal disinfected his upper arm and applied local anesthetic.

“I can’t do this.”

“I have huge faith in you, Will. I advise you to close your eyes. You’re not in this room. You’re fishing in a stream. Do you hear the water, the birdsong?”

Will closed his eyes and groaned.

Hannibal picked up a scalpel. After the initial incision, he performed real-time ultrasound guided venipuncture. The procedure took thirty minutes, during which time Will alternated between pleading and sobbing. He jerked his arm twice—involuntary muscle spasms—but Hannibal was dexterous enough to prevent any real damage.

Three IV bags hung from the pole. Eyes red and wet, Will watched Hannibal attach them to separate lumens on the port. He was marginally calmer, having either worn himself out or regained control over himself.

Hannibal laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. “This is the first step of your recovery. I’m proud of you, Will.”

“Done?” Will’s jaw cracked after gritting his teeth so long.

“I wish we were, but I’m afraid not. You have healthy antibodies going in. Now we need to take the unhealthy antibodies out.” Hannibal rolled a machine out from the corner. It had been difficult to acquire on such short notice. “Have you heard of plasmapheresis? It will require a second IV port, this time in your jugular.”

“Oh, God.”

“Another short procedure. This time you’ll have the benefit of diazepam. I’m sure you remember what that feels like.”

Hannibal raised the syringe to inspect for particles or discoloration, then brought the needle to Will’s axillary artery. Will tried to jerk away, but Hannibal held down his shoulder. He injected the sedative, then administered a second injection containing a pre-procedure prophylaxis.

“Bastard. You could have done this for the other one.”

Hannibal could have, but this was Will’s reward for doing well and Will knew that. They both understood how operant conditioning worked.

He applied more antiseptic and local anesthetic to Will’s chest and neck.

Will’s muscles relaxed as the diazepam took effect. It wasn’t long before he graced Hannibal with the slightest sliver of a smile, eyes half-lidded. Hannibal smiled back.

“That was a heavy dose, Doctor.”

“My welcome home present to you. How was St. Louis?”

“Sucked.” Will hissed as Hannibal made an incision at the base of his neck over his internal jugular using a #11 scalpel—the same type he favored for pencil sharpening. A bead of blood welled around the blade. “I don’t remember much besides Lounds punching me.”

“I’m glad you remember our fight at least.” Hannibal punctured Will’s jugular with a needle and fed the wire through.

“How did you meet the man who killed the Shermans?”

Hannibal began advancing the wire down Will’s jugular toward the inferior vena cava. He wondered why he was reluctant to discuss the dragon.

“He showed up on my doorstep one day, wanting to meet the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Did you two have a laugh, talking about me?”

Hannibal paused with the wire to glance at Will’s face. He was glaring up at the ceiling. “Our conversations were more engaging than amusing. I believe he wanted to kill us at first.”

“What changed?”

“You would know better than I. It happened during one of your meetings.”

Will looked disgusted. “I met him?”

“He took advantage of my schedule at the hospital to follow you. He became obsessive. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was outside the house right now, waiting to make sure you’re

alive." Hannibal didn't elaborate on the nature of their relationship. "You may want to close your eyes for this next step. You'll feel a slight pinch."

Wire in place, Hannibal made a one-inch horizontal incision in Will's chest with a #15 blade, just below his clavicle. After consideration he elected to perform a blunt dissection, inserting his finger into the cut to create a pocket large enough for the port. A few drops of blood seeped out of the opening.

Will opened his eyes while Hannibal's finger was still in his chest. "Hey," he slurred. "Get out of there."

"Forgive me, this will only take a moment. There." The hole made a wet sucking noise as he carefully pulled his finger out. He slid the port into the pocket and began subcutaneously tunneling the catheter upwards over Will's clavicle.

"I can't believe he's still alive. You're ok with him hanging out on your block?"

"I find myself in a novel position. I don't make a habit of killing people on my front stoop and it's rather difficult to stalk someone who's stalking you. So we have an unsteady truce. Mutually assured destruction, if you will."

"He's going to get caught."

"Yes," Hannibal agreed. They both saw the problem with that.

Will was silent during the catheter's slow progress, becoming agitated as it approached his neck.

"What's he like?" he asked shakily, blinking up at the ceiling.

Hannibal hesitated. "Are you familiar with William Blake's *Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in the Sun*?"

"Just his poison tree. Thanks to you."

"Blake's dragon stands over a pleading woman caught in the coil of its tail." He paused. "Few images in Western art radiate such a unique and nightmarish charge of demonic sexuality."

"That's what he's Becoming?" Will's tone was impassive.

"With the help of the Shermans and now the Loundses. As the Dragon grows in strength and glory there are families to come. Tell me, was it magnificent, hearing the cold drips in his darkness? Watching the world through his red haze?"

Will sighed. "The Shermans were the best thing he ever knew. I'd be interested in seeing what he did with the Loundses. Too bad I've been removed from the investigation." He stifled a whimper as Hannibal connected the catheter to the venous entry site.

When the catheter was in place and its final location confirmed with ultrasound, Hannibal checked its function by attaching a syringe to the port and drawing blood. Everything in order, he locked Will's chest pocket with an anticoagulant and began applying sutures to the incision.

"So, what's the plan?" Will asked, looking anywhere but at Hannibal. "You don't seem like a catch and release sort of guy."

"I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise." In fact, telling Will his plan would prevent it from working. "Let's focus on your recovery for now."

Will didn't look reassured.

Hannibal connected the plasmapheresis tubing to Will's chest port and turned on the centrifuge. They both watched Will's blood snake along the tube until it reached the machine.

"We'll start with six hours and go from there."

Hannibal fetched a wet cloth from the bathroom just outside the room. He was gone for less than twenty seconds. Will stared at the study beyond the door until the moment Hannibal closed and locked it. He had a clear view of the balcony door on the far side of the floor. Now he knew that they were on the fourth floor.

Hannibal sat at Will's bedside. Will blinked up at him drowsily, on the verge of falling asleep from the diazepam now that his panic had abated. Hannibal gently wiped the blood off his split lip and scraped arms. Neither needed stitches. He sponged some of the sweat from his upper body before setting the cloth aside.

"There is one more task for today." Hannibal didn't look at Will, busying himself with another set of supplies. He had saved this procedure for last, thinking it might be the most difficult for Will. "Since you'll be on an IV most of the time and I'll be gone for upwards of twelve hours a day, you'll need a urinary catheter."

That woke Will up. "You're kidding."

"I promise this will be quick and painless." Hannibal attached the urinary bag to the bed and ensured the clamp was closed. Then he pulled back the hospital blanket and ratcheted Will's legs tighter to the bed rails, spreading them.

"How about I do it myself?" Will offered.

Hannibal didn't justify that with a response. "This is just another medical procedure. Under normal circumstances, I would have a nurse perform it."

He completely depersonalized the patient before grasping the penis to wash it with soap and warm water. He applied lubricant to the tip of the catheter, changed into fresh gloves, and sterilized the urethral meatus. He was about to ask the patient to bear down as if urinating when it twitched and began filling out.

A reflexive erection. Hannibal let go. He hadn't anticipated this complication.

Will had his eyes screwed shut. His face was red.

“This is a totally normal physiological reaction, Will. It’s not uncommon to catheterize patients while they’re erect, but only under anesthesia. It would be uncomfortable for you if I continue. We’ll wait a few moments.”

“No, just do it,” Will ground out.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! Hurry up!”

Hannibal proceeded. When he was done, he secured the catheter to Will’s leg and replaced the blanket.

“Thank you for your patience.”

Will grumbled something unintelligible.

The doorbell extender chimed. Odd. Hannibal hadn’t expected anyone for at least a few more hours.

He could gag Will, but he’d choke if he vomited, which was a real possibility in his current state. Will already had diazepam in his system—a contraindication for chloroform—and Hannibal didn’t want to apply blunt force trauma to his head. There was no safe way to knock him out.

Their eyes met. Hannibal could hear Will’s cogs turning.

“This room is heavily insulated, but there’s no such thing as perfect soundproofing. You may be able to shout loud enough for the person downstairs to hear. If that’s what you choose to do, know that you’ll be responsible for what happens to them, whoever they may be. Do you understand?”

Will tried to nod, but the restraints stopped him. “Yes.”

Hannibal pocketed the #15 scalpel and went downstairs.

Alana stood on his front step, eyes and nose red from crying. “Have you seen Will lately?”

Hannibal took her coat. “Not since Wednesday.”

“Did he do or say anything weird before you last saw him? Talk about going somewhere?”

“No. Did something happen to him?”

“He disappeared from his house this morning.” Alana slumped into the couch. “The police found traces of blood on the basement floor, but they don’t know whether he was abducted or went off on his own. They just finished interviewing me.”

Hannibal sat next to her gingerly. “Has he been declared missing?”

“Yes, but—the Lounds family, that article they ran in the Tattler—”

Hannibal arranged his face into a look of concern. “I saw it. Do they think that’s why?”

“They think the Chesapeake Ripper took him,” Alana whispered. “He could already be dead. I can’t help but feel it’s my fault.”

“You were fifty miles away. How could you possibly be responsible?”

“He didn’t tell me he was still consulting for the FBI. He said he was done with them. Hannibal, I was—I’m his only friend. I should have been there for him.”

She was about to cry. Hannibal drew her into a hug.

“You couldn’t have known.”

Alana pressed herself fully against him. “What if he turns up tomorrow, like the other two?”

“Will is very intelligent. If anyone could escape a killer, it’s him.”

He needed to keep Will under observation for the next few hours to deal with any complications from the plasmapheresis and diazepam. Will could also enter a psychotic state at any moment, in which case he may forget Hannibal’s warning and start yelling.

Will would be disappointed if Alana died.

It was several minutes before Alana collected herself. She pulled back, tears in her eyelashes, lips bright pink. What would Will have given to see this sight? Hannibal was in the middle of enjoying that thought when she climbed onto his lap and kissed him.

Ah. He had almost forgotten about this part. Funerals often make people want sex—it’s one in the eye for death. Hannibal was in a celebratory mood and found he was amenable, but taking Alana upstairs to the bedroom was a bad idea. They would have to make do in the living room.

Slipping his scalpel into the couch crevice, he kissed her back. When she unbuttoned her blouse, he dipped down to lick the spot just below her clavicle. His teeth grazed the skin. As he ran his hand down her spine to rest over her L3-L4 interspace, he recalled the wet suck of his finger in Will’s chest.

Alana was fumbling with Hannibal’s trousers when Chilton’s watch slid out of his pocket.

She paused when she saw it. Of course she did. It wasn’t the type of watch Hannibal would wear and, besides, he was already wearing one. Hannibal thought back to Heimlich’s retirement party, the only time she might’ve seen it on Will’s wrist. It had been hidden under his cuff, but had it slipped out during their conversation in Heimlich’s study? Perhaps during their left-handed shake, when Will had inspected Hannibal’s polydactyly?

Hannibal continued kissing her neck—right over her jugular—as if nothing was wrong.

“What does FC stand for?”

“One of my mentors at the Department of Surgery. I was wrapping his birthday gift when you called.”

Alana picked up the watch and inspected it further, brow crinkled. Did she notice the creases in the leather, the thin scratch on the watch face, indicators that it had a previous owner? Hannibal inched his hand toward the cushions.

“I’ve never seen initials embossed on a leather watchband before.”

“The recipient has unique tastes.”

“God, what am I doing? Will could be—and here I am…” Alana swung herself off his lap and put her head in her hands, still holding the watch.

Hannibal tucked himself away and stood to pour her a cup of coffee. “When faced with death, it’s natural to seek comfort in the affirmation of life.”

“Sex is a salve,” Alana agreed. “A release of endorphins to soothe pain.”

“Then there’s no reason to be ashamed. I only knew Will for a short time, but I could tell he cared for you a great deal. He wouldn’t want you to torture yourself.” Hannibal exchanged the coffee for Chilton’s watch and slipped it back in his pocket.

“Don’t talk about him like he’s dead,” she snapped. “Not unless they find his body.”

“My apologies.”

“In the week he was here, were you two friendly? I mean, do you think he wanted to be your friend?”

Hannibal gazed upward, as if in thought. Two floors above, Will was tied to the hospital bed, listening to the click of the plasmapheresis machine and battling the urge to scream.

“Will has a powerful internal landscape. In the course of his life, I’d be surprised if he let more than a handful of people enter his world. I don’t know if I was one of those lucky few, but I hope to be, one day.”

Robin Redbreast

Will struggled to think through the Valium haze. Panic kept him awake.

There was still daylight outside. He'd seen the sun through the balcony door. That meant it'd been less than eight hours since Hannibal had kidnapped him.

He'd been part of enough missing persons investigations to be acutely aware how critical the first forty-eight hours were. Evidence washes away and the memory of witnesses has a short half-life—fewer breadcrumbs to follow with every passing moment. How soon had the police officer noticed Will's disappearance? Had it been half an hour? An hour? How long had he tried to get into Chilton's locked house before calling Crawford?

Hannibal had left no evidence in the basement. Using the steppingstones, he could've easily avoided leaving footprints in the backyard. He had parked in the laneway, obscured from Chilton's house by trees. The only way anyone would have seen his car was if someone had been walking down the laneway or if their one neighbor happened to glance out of their garage door window.

Damn the wealthy. Damn their tall fences and hedgerows. All that privacy was getting Will killed.

Crawford was his only hope. If he remembered his brief suspicion of Hannibal after the typewriter incident, if he canvassed Roland Park to see if anyone had seen a Bentley Mulsanne that morning, if someone actually *had* noticed and remembered the car, then Will had the slimmest chance of surviving.

That could be Crawford downstairs right now. Crawford had a gun. If Will could yell past the soundproofing, if Crawford heard him before Hannibal did…

Through the muffled dullness of the Valium, Will's nerves jangled like a bunch of empty wire hangers. His chest was tight with air as a scream perched under his chin. He was already screaming in his mind; he would only have to let it out. He wheezed out a giggle on accident, then clamped his mouth shut.

Breaking the restraints was a lost cause. Even if Hannibal hadn't injected him with a muscle relaxant, the bed restraints prevented him from moving his arms at all. And it would take time to wear down the leather anyway.

For what felt like hours, Will was left alone with his fevered thoughts. He still felt Hannibal's hand on his aching neck. His left arm and chest became sore as the lidocaine wore off. His dick burned from the catheter insertion—humiliating. He resolutely did not look at his chest: the three ECG electrodes and lump where the machine was sucking his blood. *Hannibal had stitched the device inside him*. He had so many tubes coming out of his body, how would he run even if he got the chance?

At last Hannibal returned. He slipped the door key in his pocket—the right one, the same as last time—and began fitting the blood pressure cuff back onto Will's arm.

"That was Alana. She's worried about you."

Will had almost killed her. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to scream. But he knew from his time in New Orleans that such behavior alienated your caregiver from you, made you seem less human. He needed to be sane, especially with Hannibal. As soon as he got tired of Will—and he would quickly tire of a madman—he'd kill him.

Instead, Will latched onto Hannibal's gaze and fell back into his mind. Hannibal was in a fantastic mood. Will was inundated with nauseating pleasure at his own captivity—a side effect of empathizing with one's kidnapper. He tried to ignore it.

Desperately, he searched for what Hannibal wanted. Will could be anything for him, if only he *knew what that was*. God, the man was so abstruse. He had no sympathies for Will to exploit, only a vast pit of emptiness, of *boredom*, and the thoughts with which he amused himself.

He put all that aside and focused on mirroring Hannibal's calm. Time to put on the dog and pony show.

"Did you give her my best?" Will asked lightly.

Hannibal started the blood pressure cuff. It constricted Will's arm.

"I gave her what she deserved." Will went lightheaded. No—no, he couldn't have—just to punish him? "A shoulder to cry on. It will be a long time before she accepts your loss."

Relief, but also confirmation that Alana would never see Will again.

Will's previous suspicions crystallized into surety. Why would the Chesapeake Ripper act as his doctor, treating this purported—whatever disease—encephalitis? There was an obvious answer: he wanted to eat his brain. He probably wanted to eat other parts too, and they might taste better if Will wasn't sick, but the brain was the problem. Will thought of kuru, mad cow disease, infectious prions. If something was wrong with the brain, Hannibal would want to fix it before exposure. Should he ask what recipes Hannibal was planning? What Greek myth best encapsulated his short, sorry life? Would Hannibal consider that crass or amusing?

The blood pressure cuff relaxed.

"I'm glad she has a friend in you." Please, for the love of God, be her friend.

Hannibal examined Will's vitals on the monitor. "Relationships are malleable. Alana wants to pursue something deeper, but I'd cut things off if you thought it might come between us."

Cut things off? Will had to suppress another manic laugh.

"Oh, no, go right ahead. There's little chance of anything getting between us now."

Hannibal didn't look amused. "We have similar interests, similar worldviews. For the first time in a long while, I see the possibility of friendship. Nothing has truly changed, Will. I don't see why we can't carry on as before."

That bizarre doubling again. Will was captor and captive, killer and victim, devourer and devoured. He didn't regret what he'd done. In fact, he reveled in it and anticipated their future together. But there was a small wound at his side where their former connection had been. Tattered now. Hannibal spoke their horrific truth: separation was painful.

Will didn't want to see this. He couldn't afford to return that ache. He didn't know how Hannibal expected him to react.

"If you'd asked me, I might've gone with you."

"There's no need to lie, Will." That stung. Will didn't know if he was feeling Hannibal's disappointment or his own shame. "I hope that trust will come with time."

He was asking a lot with that one. Will didn't know whether he was trying to please Hannibal or if he meant it, but he said, "I'll try."

***

Hannibal came home from his twelve-hour shift at the hospital at six o'clock sharp every day to attend to Will. He let the plasmapheresis machine run overnight and began IVIG before leaving in the mornings. Will transitioned to a nocturnal sleep pattern. Hannibal was tempted to forgo sleep entirely to spend more time with him, but he set a hard rule for himself that he'd get at least three hours per night.

Besides the typical care a bedridden patient requires—washing, feeding, laundry—there were the daily trips to the bathroom. Hannibal sedated Will heavily the first few times, then slowly reduced the dose until Will was habituated to compliance. Will only tried to wrest free from Hannibal's grasp once, and the attempt landed him a bloody nose, a chloroform-induced headache, and an uncomfortable bowel movement several hours later.

Will was still tethered to the rails by the cuffs on his arms and legs, but Hannibal had removed the bed restraints. This provided Will enough freedom of movement to reposition himself and prevent bed sores, but also allowed him to interfere with his IV lines. After Will tore a few sutures in his chest trying to get his port out, Hannibal didn't leave him alone without strapping mittens on his hands.

While corticosteroids can help alleviate inflammation immediately, recovery from anti-NMDAR encephalitis is not instantaneous, nor is it linear. During treatment, patients often experience the stages of the disease in reverse, including waves of psychosis. Will was no exception. Over the coming days Hannibal met many versions of him, several of whom tried his patience.

Sometimes Will forgot his abduction and begged Hannibal for help, thinking he was back in the hospital in New Orleans.

“Hannibal, you have to get me out of here. I’m not crazy.”

The first few times this happened, Hannibal politely explained where Will was and what had happened, but Will either disbelieved him or was driven to self-injury. He learned it was better to hold Will’s hand and play along with his delusions.

Sometimes Will was convinced that Hannibal was two separate people. One was his friend. The other was the Chesapeake Ripper.

“Hannibal,” he whispered, fearfully watching the door. “The Ripper is using your face to kill people. They’re going to think he’s you.”

“Oh, dear. Thank you for the warning.”

“*Shh*, I think he’s coming. It’s too late for me, but you can escape. Run, quick.”

Sometimes Will didn’t recognize Hannibal at all, seeing the face of some nameless doctor instead. These episodes were always exciting, though loud. Hannibal looked forward to hearing what new threats and expletives Will could formulate. He particularly relished any insults hurled at the medical system or the field of psychological science as a whole.

On rare occasions, Will would simultaneously forget his abduction and mistake Hannibal for someone significant to his past. Hannibal took advantage of these moments of peaceful conversation to explore Will’s former relationships. His deceased father was a common candidate, and Hannibal was happy to provide Will with the paternal presence he so desperately needed. He was surprised when Will reacted positively to a hallucination of Garret Jacob Hobbs, even going so far as to worry if he was doing well in the BSHCI. Hannibal assured him he was.

One day, while Hannibal was taking his blood pressure, Will mistook him for someone new.

“Peter? Is that you?” Beside himself with emotion, Will spoke as if Hannibal were a cross between his long-lost brother and the final arbiter of his soul. Hesitantly, he grasped the hem of Hannibal’s shirt to assess the reality of the fabric.

Hannibal recognized the name from the articles he’d read on the Drumgo incident. Peter Bridgham, Will’s partner back when he’d worked homicide, had been one of the casualties in the shoot-out.

“Yes,” he lied.

Will blinked his tears into submission. “I had an awful dream that you died. How’re Beatrice and Hannah?”

“They’re doing wonderfully. Can you tell me about this dream?”

“Aw, you don’t want me to bore you with that. Hannah’s about two now, right? What was her first word?”

Hannibal paused. “Dad.”

“Well done! I bet you’ll have her shooting in no time.”

Hannibal changed tack. “Could you remind me of the details of our latest case?”

“Sure thing. Let me fix you a drink.” Will attempted to stand up, then fell back like an animal caught in a trap. He looked at the restraints, uncomprehending. “Say, would you mind helping me out?”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Will.”

The readings on the patient monitor became irregular. “Is this because of what I did?”

“Of course not. You’re here for your wellbeing, not as a punishment.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“Never.”

Will tugged at his restraints again. “I’m sorry, ok? Please, don’t go.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Will’s side of the conversation devolved into a litany of apologies, no matter what Hannibal said. Eventually, Will lost focus and, like so many moments these days, the exchange evaporated from his memory. Afterwards, he didn’t respond to questions about Peter, and Hannibal could only watch with frustration as he withdrew into depressed silence each time he was mentioned.

His least favorite times were when Will retreated into himself. When this happened, it was hard to tell if he was entering a catatonic state or simply ignoring him. If Will didn’t speak for longer than an hour, Hannibal found himself checking for positive symptoms of catatonia—posturing, echopraxia, echolalia—but Will either didn’t respond or gave him an annoyed look, making it clear he knew what Hannibal was doing.

Of course, Hannibal was most pleased when Will was fully lucid and they could play their game. They watched each other intently, each trying to get into the other’s head. There were moments when Hannibal felt like he was speaking to his reflection. At others, he felt like he knew Will better than he knew himself. He loved to catch flashes of Will’s unguarded anger while he plotted his escape or devised a new manipulation. Even during their most inane conversations, he’d never been so mentally stimulated.

But Will’s lucidity never lasted long. He would become confused, lose his short-term memory, and become complaisant. It was during these periods—the cusp between Will’s waking and psychotic worlds—that Hannibal did his work.

As Will’s brain repaired its damage over the coming weeks, he would experience heightened neuroplasticity. Broken neural connections would be forged anew under Hannibal’s careful guidance. He took his inspiration from recent studies on prairie voles. The goal was to strengthen Will’s engram of Hannibal and associate it with the oxytocin and dopaminergic

reward systems, thereby creating preference. There were many ways to do this, some subtle, some not.

First and most principal was the importance of the olfactory bulb in social memory. Hannibal dressed Will in his own clothes, sometimes ones he'd worn to the hospital the day before. Undershirts were particularly useful since Will was less likely to pay them mind. He was careful to use the same cologne and detergent throughout the process. Consistency would improve recognition.

Hannibal spoon-fed Will all of his meals out of Tupperware using soft plastic cutlery. Will willingly ate grains and produce but became skittish when meat was involved. Hannibal gentled him by carding a hand through his hair, holding the spoon to Will's lips until, trembling, he parted them. In this fashion, they shared pappardelle, heart tartare, and lung bourguignonne. The heart and lungs were the most troubling to Will. When Hannibal informed him that Dacre's pectoralis was in the pappardelle, Will grimaced.

"Pappardelle alla Dacre," he muttered before swallowing a bite.

Hannibal brought in a record player so they could listen to Italian opera over the clicking of the plasmapheresis machine. He introduced Will to Bach's *Air on G String* and *Goldberg Variations*. When he asked Will what he would like to listen to he expected a request for Willie Nelson or Doc Watson. Will surprised him by asking for Mozart's *Requiem*. It wasn't the most uplifting choice, but Hannibal obliged.

For more overt conditioning, Hannibal turned to sodium amytal and scopolamine.

"What's that?" Will was so used to injections of diazepam, he no longer panicked at the sight of a needle.

"We're going to have some fun today."

Will looked noncommittal. When the drugs had taken effect, Hannibal unhooked his patient monitor sensors, catheters, and restraints. He dressed Will in a soft turtleneck that Hannibal had worn to sleep for the last week.

Will was as shaky as a newborn fawn when Hannibal helped him to his feet. He raised an eyebrow when they passed the bathroom and entered the main study—the farthest he'd strayed from the hospital bed since the beginning of his confinement.

A record of classical adagio movements played. Candlelight flickered over the bookcases. The curtains over the balcony doors were drawn shut, but they could hear the pitter patter of rain on the balcony beyond.

Hannibal set Will down on the couch and draped a blanket from Hannibal's bed over him. Will was on the verge of falling asleep, but his bleary eyes fixed on the balcony curtains a mere six feet away. Hannibal patted his cheek to get his attention.

"I prepared sanguinaccio dolce for us tonight. A classic Neapolitan dessert traditionally made with pig's blood."

Will blinked at the table. Chocolate pudding sat in a hollowed-out orange half, garnished with a cinnamon stick with a side of fresh figs.

“Whose blood is in it?”

“Mine.”

It took several seconds for that to sink in. Will quirked his lips into a rare smile.

“Consensual cannibalism?”

“We are sailing in uncharted waters. Let me know how it is.”

Will obediently licked the proffered spoon, closing his eyes to savor it. This was not his first taste of Hannibal’s blood. He worried for a moment that Will would remember his seizure in Pittsburg—negative emotions would counteract any neurotransmitter release from the chocolate—but Will swallowed happily.

“Cinnamon, vanilla, and… are those pine nuts?”

“Your palate is growing more refined.” Hannibal fed him another spoonful. Some chocolate smeared on Will’s mouth as he clumsily ate. He didn’t have full command of his muscles. Hannibal cleaned him up with his pocket square.

“It’s good. Will you taste it?” Teasing.

Hannibal hadn’t planned to. He’d brought only one utensil, but this seemed like an opportune moment to please Will. He lifted the spoon to his mouth. The salty, metallic tang of blood brought out the flavor of the cocoa, but the highlight was Will’s clear scent, untainted by fear or anxiety for the first time in days.

“I’ve outdone myself.”

Will treated Hannibal to his laugh.

When the dolce was finished, Hannibal arranged Will between his thighs so that he was leaning back against Hannibal’s chest, legs outstretched on the couch. Will protested weakly, but was too confused to fully register what was happening. Hannibal pulled the blanket up to Will’s waist. It seemed uncouth, but warmth and physical contact were the most efficient tools for his purpose.

Hannibal tucked Will’s head under his chin and opened a large book containing full-page glossy photos of Italian Renaissance architecture.

“Do you remember any of the Italian I taught you?”

Of course, as an eidetiker, Will had a remarkable memory for any visuals Hannibal provided. After a week, he was able to read rudimentary French, Italian, and Latin. He struggled more when it came to pronunciation and forming sentences. He would probably be further along if it weren’t for encephalitic and drug-induced memory impairment.

Will looked at the page, gripping Hannibal's knee as if he was afraid he'd fall off the couch.

"A little. Piazzale Michelangelo a Firenze rappresenta il più observation point of the city panorama, riprodotto in innumerevoli cartoline and is an obligatory destination for turisti in visita alla città."

Hannibal tried to correct his pronunciation of "città," but Will had trouble getting past its resemblance to the English obscenity. Hannibal let it go.

He pointed out several landmarks in the panorama and had Will name them: the Duomo, the Palazzo Vecchio, and the bell tower of the Badia Fiorentina. Will translated the captions. Despite the caffeine from the chocolate, he grew drowsy. When he'd relaxed fully into his chest, Hannibal brought out his sketches.

"Here are the shops along the Ponte Vecchio. Condividevamo il cibo qui, insieme, con gioia. Ti ricordi?"

We used to share food here, together, with joy. Do you remember?

"Vorrei ricordarmelo."

I wish I remembered.

"You don't? We used to stroll the Lungarni at dawn to visit the Uffizi Gallery. You liked to see *Giuditta decapita Oloferne*, but you were more partial to the sculptures. Do you remember your favorite?"

They had gone through the complete collections of the Uffizi during a previous session.

Will's muscles spasmed as he recalled. "*San Lorenzo*."

Hannibal squeezed Will's hand. "Volgendo lo sguardo a Dio, il santo è rappresentato mentre sciogliendo la sofferenza fisica in abbandono all'estasi. You have excellent taste. Bernini captured the rapture of his martyrdom beautifully. And do you remember my favorite?"

"Botticelli… *Primavera*."

"Very good, Will." Hannibal turned to the next sketch: a reinterpretation of Chloris and Zephyrus with different faces and clothes. They were nestled in a rowboat, surrounded by flowers arranged as if they were blooming from Chloris's mouth. Her left breast was exposed. "Do you remember recreating *Primavera* together?"

Will began shivering. "I—I don't know."

Hannibal checked his pulse: elevated. He put away the sketch. They would resume after Will calmed down.

The doorbell rang.

It was two am. That could only be one person.

“Excuse me, Will. I need you to stay right here while I answer the door.”

Will nodded absently.

The dragon glowered on the front stoop. He wore the same jacket as always—with the same lump in his pocket where he carried his pistol.

“Good evening. What can I do for you?”

“I came to see Will.”

“I’m afraid now’s not a good time, but rest assured that he’s alive and well.”

“I’ll bang on your door day and night until you let me see him.” The lump shifted in his pocket.

“...Very well.”

Hannibal led the dragon upstairs, listening for the click of the gun safety.

The situation was far from ideal. If the dragon fired shots, the police could be notified. He’d have to kill him, knock Will out with a hit to the head, then kill any officers who happened to arrive too early. At that point, he’d be on the run with Will, whose treatment would be set back by a few days without access to plasmapheresis.

But this situation might work out in their favor. At this early hour, it was likely no one had seen the dragon enter the house. If Hannibal could get the gun away from him before he fired, this would be the perfect time to remove a bothersome liability.

Barber’s *Agnus Dei* filled the study.

Will had managed to pull the curtains back from the balcony door. Too weak to punch through the reinforced glass, he leaned his forehead against it, fists balled, and inspected the lock on the handle.

“Say hello to our guest, Will.”

Will turned, unsteady on his legs. He was confused when he saw the dragon. Then recognition dawned. He raised his puppy dog eyebrows.

“D?”

Hannibal had hoped Will wouldn’t remember him. This complicated things.

The dragon ducked underneath one of Will’s arms to lend support, glaring back at Hannibal. “What did you do to him?”

“I gave him a sedative so that we could enjoy a meal together. He’s completely fine.”

Will hissed as the dragon helped him back to the couch.

“Are you injured?” He ran his fingers over Will’s arm.

“You’re pulling at his peripheral IV.”

“I have tubes now.” Will drew the dragon’s hand to his chest, letting him feel the implanted port through his sweater. Then, distracted, he reached up to pull the dragon’s collar aside, revealing his bite mark. Red and inflamed, it was a perfect twin to the one on Hannibal’s arm. “I remember biting you. That was in this room, wasn’t it?”

Hannibal examined Will’s body language with dismay: welcoming and curious. Nobody was this good of an actor under the influence of sodium amytal, at least not with the dose he’d given Will. Whatever character this was, he’d fully embodied it.

The dragon felt Will’s ports through his clothes with horror. “What is this?”

“Will’s treatment is coming along nicely. If his recovery isn’t disturbed, I expect to see a significant improvement within the next three weeks.”

Hannibal circled them, putting a hand in his scalpel pocket. If he could get behind the dragon while he was distracted with Will…

“Look at him. He can barely walk.” A vein stood out on the dragon’s forehead as his face turned pink. He was clearly undergoing some internal battle.

Will tugged at the dragon’s sleeve. “Calm down, D.”

“He’s under sedation, for his safety as well as ours.” Almost behind them…

The dragon shook Will off and stood up. “You’re still doing it. You’re still killing him.”

“If I intended to kill him, he’d already be dead.”

The dragon pulled his gun just as Hannibal leapt forward with his scalpel.

The gun never fired. Will had grabbed it and jammed a finger between the firing pin and the hammer. He leaned against the dragon weakly, clutching his jacket to stay upright. Gradually, he tugged the gun away, pressed the button to release the magazine, and kicked the ammunition across the floor. It slid out of sight under the desk.

Hannibal righted himself, glad he hadn’t accidentally stabbed Will. Both he and the dragon were at a loss, caught between watching each other to make sure they didn’t attack and watching Will take heaving breaths against the dragon’s chest, a voluntary human shield.

Will held the gun out to Hannibal. When the dragon opened his mouth to protest, he explained. “He’ll want to wipe my fingerprints.”

Hannibal did so, taking it to the bathroom to use fresh gloves and soap. Though they were whispering, he overheard their conversation.

“Come with me.”

“I’m ok. Really.”

“He’ll kill you eventually.”

Will didn’t say anything.

“I’d take you home. You’d be safe with me.”

“I know.”

Hannibal returned to find them by the stairwell, holding each other by the arms. It wasn’t clear who was leading who. He exchanged the gun for Will, who immediately grabbed Hannibal’s wrist–the one holding the scalpel behind his back. Hannibal steadied him, fearing he’d slip and cut himself.

“You can’t come here anymore, D.” Hannibal heard what Will meant. *I can’t protect you from him again.*

The dragon scowled, looking between them. “How will I know you’re okay?”

“Keep reading the Tattler. If my body doesn’t turn up, assume I’m still alive.”

The dragon grimaced but nodded and disappeared down the stairs.

Will didn’t relax his grip on Hannibal’s wrist until they heard the front door slam shut. Hannibal set him back on the couch and went to make sure the dragon was really gone. He watched his figure retreat down the street until it turned a corner. It was tempting to give chase, but Will was still loose upstairs.

Will was pale and sweaty when he returned.

“Hannibal, I think I—” He broke off with a groan, clutching at his peripheral IV port.

Hannibal pried Will’s hand away. A carnation of blood bloomed on his inner arm. He had Will’s sweater off in seconds. The medical tape holding the catheter in place had peeled, allowing the line to tear the opening to Will’s basilic vein and cause a hemorrhage.

Will blanched when he saw the bleeding entry site. “Oh.”

Hannibal retrieved antiseptic, tape, and gauze. “Stay calm, Will. This is nothing to worry about.”

Will whined, something he only did when he was approaching a panic attack.

“I want you to perform your calming exercises while I hold pressure on your arm. Do you remember how to do progressive muscle relaxation?”

Will nodded jerkily. He held himself together remarkably well compared to a week ago, and almost had his breathing under control by the time the bleeding subsided.

Hannibal was in the middle of applying a sterile transparent dressing when Will caught his arm. He undid the button of Hannibal's cuff and rolled down the sleeve, revealing his bite. The suck mark had faded, and the scabs had fallen away, leaving a shiny crimson ring.

"When did I give you this?"

Will remembered biting the dragon but not him. Nothing was going Hannibal's way this evening.

"You said it was easy not to empathize with a killer like him."

"It is."

"Why did you grab the gun?"

Will looked away. It took him a while to settle on an answer.

"I prefer my odds with you."

Hannibal examined his face and wasn't sure what he found. They sat close enough to kill one another, yet this was the farthest from Will he'd ever felt.

"Better the devil you know."

The Wounded Bird

In two weeks of captivity, Will became intimately familiar with the void inside Hannibal. The hollow-eyed, pitiful creature tried to fill it with food, art, and violence, but the emptiness always remained. He was deeply, frighteningly possessive of Will, his greatest source of entertainment, and not just of his presence, but of his attention and thoughts as well.

He was allergic to leaving Will alone. His every free moment was spent squatting at Will's bedside, leaching the life out of him. He wouldn't shut the fuck up. He read aloud. He lectured Will on language, history, and music theory. He walked Will through the recipes of all the meals they shared as if he was a culinary instructor. He wanted to know Will's opinion on everything.

He asked intrusive personal questions about Will's past, savoring painful memories of his father's neglect and his failures to connect with others. The memory Hannibal wanted more than anything was of the day Will shot Evelda Drumgo. He alluded to it frequently, knowing that if he asked about it outright, Will would shut down.

Ignoring Hannibal was the only real way to punish him. Physical resistance seemed to excite him, but when Will stopped responding to his remarks he grew agitated within minutes, unable to focus on his reading material, staring at Will with an openly pained expression. He drew closer on instinct, using tests for echopraxia as an excuse. "Don't shake my hand," he'd say, raising his hand for a shake. Or he'd reach into his pocket and say, "Stick your tongue out, I want to stick a pin in it." Ha. It was tempting to fall for it just to see his face, but a reaction was exactly what Hannibal wanted.

Will didn't ignore him often, however, because Hannibal had ways of punishing him in return. He injected him with sedatives and hypnotics to loosen his tongue. He dropped hints at the goings-ons of the outside world without elaborating, implying that the Tooth Fairy had struck again or that Alana had come to visit. And if Will ignored him longer than an hour, there would always, *always* be meat for dinner.

Hannibal fed Dacre to him slowly, only a few bites per meal. The man had questioned Hannibal's floral arrangements for the dinner party the day before his death, protesting that white lilies were for funerals. "He'd been in my Rolodex for quite some time," Hannibal assured Will. "The greenhouses are better off without him."

Will didn't comment on Dacre's resemblance to himself, but he was acutely aware of it every time he swallowed a piece of him.

He frequently thought back to Dacre's presentation at the arboretum and Hannibal's letter, trying to reinterpret their meaning in light of the current situation. He no longer believed that it was meant to mock him. Increasingly, he thought that Hannibal didn't know what it all meant either. What Hannibal wanted from Will ran so deep in his subconscious, there was no way for Will to access it. He caught glimpses of it, though.

Part of it was Will's metamorphosis. During one of their many conversations, Will sensed the umbilical cord forming between them and realized that, like Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, Hannibal was trying to merge with him. A mental union would precede their physical one—for Will still believed that Hannibal intended to eat his brain. His slow recovery had him tied to the railroad track, watching the train approach from ten miles away. Every drip of the IV brought him one second closer to death. But he needed to recover in order to have a chance at survival.

Crawford wasn't coming. He had to kill Hannibal.

He imagined killing Hannibal during every waking moment. In these fantasies, his muscles weren't atrophied from two weeks of illness and malnutrition, he wasn't attached to bags or machines, and he wasn't restrained by the leather cuffs. He drove syringes into Hannibal's neck, injecting him with lethal doses of diazepam. He slammed his head on the edge of the sink until his skull crunched. He tackled Hannibal to the floor, kicked him in the teeth, and knelt on Hannibal's chest to choke him, a reversal of their fight in the basement. Countless times, he snapped his neck. Hannibal's blood sprayed on his face and mouth, hot and metallic.

He tried to limit these fantasies when Hannibal was present. Somehow, either from his expression, his vital signs, or his fucking smell, Hannibal knew when Will was brutalizing him mentally, and it made him giddy.

"How would you kill me, Will?"

"...With my hands."

Hannibal loved that answer.

Whenever Hannibal left for the hospital, Will worked on escaping.

The first day, he'd screamed at the top of his lungs for hours, hoping a neighbor or passerby on the street would hear him. No one came. Will guessed that the only break in the soundproofing was an air vent that led to the adjacent bathroom. He would only be heard by someone inside the house. He lost his voice, and Hannibal kindly gave him cough drops to soothe his throat. It was a waste of a day.

The first week, he focused on rebuilding muscle. The nutritional IV combined with Hannibal's ample meals helped. The limb restraints gave him enough leeway to perform basic exercises. Crunches, leg lifts, Russian twists, bridges. Working on his upper body was more challenging, but he managed some reverse pushups. If Hannibal noticed the raw skin on his wrists where the fleece rubbed every night, he didn't mention it.

The second week, he experimented with the leather strap on his right hand. He couldn't reach it with his left, so he finagled it against the bed railing and pressed, bending it one way, then the other. It was high quality leather, double layered with thick stitches, but repeated stress made a weak spot. It would take a full twelve-hour operating room shift to break it, which meant getting no sleep—not that he had been getting much anyway.

But there was a bigger issue than sleep deprivation: he was losing vast stretches of time. It was hard to tell when it happened since there was no clock, but he would find unexplainable bruises on himself. One time he ripped open the sutures in his chest—he didn't remember doing that—and it took a week to convince Hannibal that he could be left alone without mittens.

Hannibal often referenced previous discussions only to be disappointed when Will didn't remember them. He mentioned details about Will that he could only know had Will divulged them personally. Likewise, Will knew things about Hannibal without remembering being told.

Eerily, knowledge about Hannibal's past would come to him in the form of memories, as if he had lived through the experiences himself. These memories transported him to Paris and Florence, where he stood at Hannibal's side, studying at Lycée, learning medicine, and cooking. They stalked Firenze di notte, and shared Will's first murder sulla riva del fiume Arno. After well over a hundred hours of mirroring Hannibal, they had begun to blur.

He learned to measure time using the fullness of the IV bags by the light of the patient monitor. He could guess the day of the week based on Hannibal's schedule at the hospital. Hannibal's shorter absences were likely Fridays, his "academic half days." These were followed by torturous weekends where Hannibal would spend upwards of twenty hours with him straight, talking right up until Will passed out from exhaustion.

It was the Monday following one of these marathons when Will attempted to escape. In the pitch dark, bone-tired from lack of sleep, he bent the leather back and forth, hammering it against the bed rail with his whole body weight. Quick, quick. Every fumble was a second wasted. A rash developed on his wrist under the fleece and began to bleed. The IV bags were full, then half-full, then gone. That meant his time was half up.

He ran his fingers over the leather to feel his progress. The crease was noticeable enough to draw Hannibal's attention now, but it didn't seem like it was halfway broken. He laughed nervously and considered the merits of pulverizing his thumb instead of the leather. If he shattered the carpometacarpal joint maybe it would be enough to slip his hand out. But how would he fare after that, with one hand?

Only his breaths marked the passage of time. During those hours, he pushed through his hysteria. His abuse of the strap was mindless. There was no point in wondering if he would finish it. He *had* to finish it, and that was that.

Finally, he wound the strap tight and tugged. His biceps strained like a mule pulling a plow, and then *SNAP*.

He actually did it.

Only a second of shock, then he was scrambling to undo the safety locks on his arms and legs. He ripped the ECG stickers from his chest, then yanked off the blood pressure cuff and pulse oximeter. Thankfully, Hannibal had turned off the patient alarm, so his flatlining ECG didn't make a sound. He had watched Hannibal detach his IV lines and urinary bag many

times and did so now carefully. After a moment's consideration, he removed the urinary catheter entirely and threw it on the ground.

He stood up and felt his way over to the lightswitch. He could see. What now?

He tested the door: too sturdy to break. He inspected the lock: a double-cylinder deadbolt. That meant it had two tumblers, making it slightly more difficult to pick. What could he use? No needles from the IV lines. He unscrewed the IV pole and examined the parts. Nothing thin enough to slip into the lock. He tried to break into the medical supply cabinets. All locked, all made of stainless steel. He could throw the whole plasmapheresis machine at them, and they might dent, nothing more. What else?

The solution came to him when his eyes fell on the flatlining patient monitor.

He used the IV pole to smash the pulse oximeter. It was the bulkier type that held onto the finger with a spring-loaded clamp. Shards of plastic flew across the floor, then *ping*. The small metal springs landed on the tile. He scooped them up and brought them to the door.

The long arms of the springs were perfectly bent for his purpose. He inserted one in the bottom of the lock as a tensioner. The second spring went deeper, searching for the pins. There was one. Then another. The spring slipped in his sweaty fingers, and he had to start over.

How much time did he have left? He was amazed he hadn't lost time yet. Maybe he was losing time now; he didn't know how it worked. *Don't lose it, Graham. Keep steady, attaboy*.

The springs scratched in the lock for an eternity, until finally… *click*.

The door swung open.

Hannibal stood on the other side, expression blank, scalpel in hand. He wore a smart blue dress shirt and paisley tie under a sweater. It was unclear if he had just returned from the hospital or if he had been listening to Will scratch at the lock the whole time, waiting to see if he could crack it.

Will was so vulnerable in comparison, kneeling, half-naked, peripheral IV port taped to his arm. All his progress was lost. If anything, this was a step back. When a sheep ran away, the shepherd used to break its leg to keep it from running again. It forced the sheep to rely on the shepherd. Oh, God, he would never escape after today. It had to be now.

"Hello, Will."

Will stared at Hannibal's scalpel. He needed a weapon.

"Hello, Doctor."

"This is just like any other trip to the bathroom. I'll have no reason to hurt you if you don't resist." Hannibal took a step forward.

Will slammed the door shut and dashed backwards, almost slipping on pieces of the pulse oximeter. The dismantled IV pole was near the bed.

The door banged open. Will swung the pole around just in time to make Hannibal dodge.

Hannibal stopped just out of range. “Metti giù il lancia, Atalanta, e vieni da me.”

Put down your spear, Atalanta, and come to me.

Will automatically switched to Italian. “Non hai mai lasciato cadere la terza mela.” *You haven’t dropped the third apple*. His resolve flickered. The tip of the pole dropped a few inches.

“No, non ancora.” *Not yet*. Hannibal took a step forward.

Will swung.

Hannibal ducked and lunged, tackling Will to the ground. The pole clattered out of his grip as his head hit the padded wall, jarring his neck. Hannibal pinned him by the throat while Will punched him in the face once, twice, three times. Blood trickled from Hannibal’s nose and smeared over his lips. It stained his blue shirt red, ruined now. Then Hannibal grabbed both his arms in one hand and held them over his head.

Will didn’t feel the scalpel until it twisted in his thigh. He froze. The cleanness of the cut delayed the pain, but it was accompanied by nauseating fear when it arrived. He couldn’t tell how long or deep the incision was. Warm liquid pooled under his leg.

Hannibal stared into his eyes, pupils dilated. He could claim that he didn’t want to hurt Will as much as he liked, but he couldn’t hide his euphoria now, blade sunk deep under Will’s skin. It shifted as Hannibal repositioned his hand, releasing a thrilling burst of wetness.

Mirroring Hannibal was as natural as breathing. Will shuddered as, through Hannibal, his pain transformed into sublime pleasure, *sacer horror*. He jerked his leg ever so slightly, and the blade slid deeper. Hannibal’s breath hitched. Synaptic feedback linking two minds. They could have held each other there for ages, eating from the lotus tree between them.

Will was reminded of San Lorenzo’s final words.

“Assum est. Versa et manduca.”

On this side I am roasted. Turn me over and then eat me.

The scalpel left him. Hannibal ran a hand down the length of the wound, stinging it with the salt of his skin. “Bernini was a great admirer of Michelangelo in his time. He sought to exceed Michelangelo’s mastery, but he only surpassed him in one regard: the realism and expressiveness of his flesh.” Hannibal squeezed his thigh, gifting Will a fresh wave of pleasure. “You need stitches.”

Back on the hospital bed. Will struggled, but Hannibal was stronger. He managed to get one last punch in before the restraints were locked. An extra leather cuff was brought out of the

cabinet to replace the one Will had broken.

The faint sting of a needle. Wonderful relief. A swell of gratitude, even. If he was doomed, then at least let him feel no fear.

Hannibal was stitching his leg. The cut was very long, but it didn't hurt. Will felt inexplicably fond of him. It didn't matter if he was a friend or an enemy, and not merely because he'd stopped the pain. Will could talk to him about anything. He didn't have to pretend. Perhaps one did not want to be loved so much as to be understood. Hannibal had kidnapped him, and at some point, it was certain, he would eat him. It didn't matter. In some sense that went deeper than friendship. They were intimates.

The sheets turned red underneath Will, like the flames that licked San Lorenzo as he lay chained to his bed of coals. San Lorenzo felt no pain in the course of his slow death because of the fire that burned within him: the love of his God.

A merciful angel with scarlet teeth and tousled hair gazed upon him now. Will reached up to stroke the scruff on his warm cheek. His knuckles were torn.

The angel spoke. Will heard himself respond and wondered who was speaking with such intimate knowledge of his thoughts.

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Three and a half weeks into Will's recovery, Hannibal was called into the operating room to perform a complex hand reconstruction. An unlucky fellow had been shot in the second intermetacarpal space and required open reduction and fixation of the bones, tendon repair, neurovascular repair, and skin grafts. As a senior resident and one of the most competent plastic surgeons in the department, Hannibal rarely required supervision, but an operation like this required Bedelia's presence. Along with their team of anaesthesiologists and assistants, they bent over the patient in the operating theater for six hours straight.

Upper limb reconstruction was Hannibal's specialty. This was the type of delicate and challenging work he was lucky to perform once a year at most. Today, however, he felt only a fleeting interest in it. His mind was elsewhere. As he often did these days, Hannibal entertained himself by imagining that he was operating on Will. As he stitched the median nerve back together through a microscope, he wondered what Will was doing at that moment. Perhaps he was using his newfound freedom of movement to make a second attempt at escape. If he managed to pick the lock again, would he be able to make it past the MCS deadbolt on the front door? Or would he break into the balcony? The possibility was invigorating.

With something as interesting as Will at home, he questioned if it was worth completing the last two months of his residency at all. As soon as Will's encephalitis was cured, it would be prudent to leave the country. Once abroad, he'd find work outside of the hospital setting, preferring a more flexible schedule that would keep him closer to home—perhaps a private practice of some sort.

After the patient had been returned to the ICU, Hannibal took a moment to sip some coffee in the hall. Bedelia joined him.

“Excellent work, as always, Hannibal. Have you considered joining the Curtis National Hand Center after you complete your tenure here?” She didn’t want Hannibal to continue at Johns Hopkins either.

He smiled and thanked her.

For a while they discussed the particularities of the tendon graft they had just performed. Eventually, Bedelia’s tone became a shade lighter.

“Lloyd Wyman’s immunology blood work came back this morning. Your treatment seems to have been effective.” She handed him the report.

Though Will’s white blood cell count was still higher than normal, it had decreased dramatically. He was on track to fully recover in a week or so.

“Thank you, Bedelia. I’m beholden to you.”

Normally the picture of composure, she now opted to study the ceiling light fixture. “How long do you intend to keep Wyman as a patient?”

“He’s an exceptional case. I’d be happy to serve as his general physician after he recovers.”

Two years ago, the death of her obsessive patient, Neal Frank, had given her a glimpse into Hannibal’s world. He’d vanished the body and provided her with an alibi, and since then she’d covered for his truancy and short hours on-call. She wasn’t aware of the exact nature of his proclivities, but she was intelligent. She had seen Hannibal and Will together at the symphony and the dinner party. She had seen an FBI agent interview Hannibal in the break room three Mondays ago. If she followed the news closely enough, she would be aware of Will’s disappearance and its presumed connection to the Chesapeake Ripper, alleged cannibal. Was she willing to make the short leap in logic from there?

He folded the blood test results and slipped them in his pocket. “I’d like to thank you in earnest. Allow me to make you dinner.”

Her alarm was evident. “I couldn’t possibly.”

The thought of his two playthings seated at the same table was too tantalizing to pass up.

“I insist, Bedelia. Join me tomorrow evening at eight o’clock sharp. There’s someone I’d like you to meet.” He left before she could protest further.

The next day, Hannibal returned from the hospital at noon. Accustomed to waking closer to two pm, Will was sound asleep when Hannibal opened the door, curled up on his side under the blanket. Though his strength had improved and his psychotic episodes were infrequent, he hadn’t attempted an escape since Hannibal had sliced his leg. It was a shame to see the fire go out of his eyes, but Hannibal anticipated its return soon enough. His tractability facilitated

their conversations in the meanwhile. Will didn't stir until Hannibal administered his daily injection.

"Hey," he said blearily, swinging his feet over the side of the bed. His hair was adorably disheveled. "Academic half day?"

They spoke in English, Italian, and French interchangeably. Hannibal chose to test Will's French today.

"Precisely." Hannibal unhooked Wil's catheters and dressed him in a shawl-neck fisherman's sweater—the replacement for the bloodstained turtleneck. "How did you sleep?"

Will lifted the sleeve to his nose and inhaled Hannibal's scent. "Great. It's nice not having the cuffs on."

Hannibal helped Will to the study, where he hand-fed him grapes and tartine à la confiture. After the small breakfast, they sat at the harpsichord. Hannibal had been delighted to discover that, despite having never received a musical education, Will had perfect pitch and a natural aptitude for reading sheet music. Translating that skill to playing an instrument was a different story.

"My hands don't work right anymore," Will complained, practically falling asleep on Hannibal's shoulder.

"Your hands work perfectly well. You're simply not used to using them in this way." This wasn't the most charitable statement, as Will's motor function was indeed impaired by the psychotropics, but it wouldn't do to encourage learned helplessness.

"There's way too many keys and they're too far apart."

Hannibal positioned Will's fingers over the first three notes of *Für Elise*. "Start with these."

Will played them.

Hannibal repositioned Will's hand over the next three notes, then the next three, until he could go back and forth between the sets. Putting it all together, Will played the low part with his left hand while Hannibal played the more complicated high part with his right. Like this, they made it through the first nine bars.

"I bet it's easier when you have eleven fingers," Will grumbled, but he seemed pleased.

As always, the lesson devolved into requests for Hannibal to play various pieces by ear. Though Hannibal tried to interest him in the works of Couperin or Scarlatti, Will was most amused by upbeat country rag tunes. His fingers ghosted the keys an octave below Hannibal's, and Hannibal smiled, pretending not to notice but slowing down so Will could keep up. He'd found that with Will, sideways enticement often worked better than the direct approach.

When Will was tired of the harpsichord, Hannibal led him downstairs for the first time since his abduction. He balked at the top of the steps, looking to Hannibal to see if he'd made a

mistake. Hannibal descended the first flight and held out a hand for Will to follow.

“We’re going to try something new today. You remember the kitchen.”

The dining room was filled with fresh arrangements of white irises and the curtains were all drawn, but those were the only differences since Will had last been here. He looked around suspiciously, as if expecting Hannibal to have a pet tiger stashed behind the chaise lounge.

Hannibal began pulling a variety of ingredients out of the fridge. “We’re having a friend for dinner today.”

Will looked at the organs—heart, lung, and trachea—and rolled his eyes. “Who is it this time?”

“I’m flattered you think I have enough time to procure meat from anyone other than the butcher when my hands are full with you.” He pulled a cleaver out of the knife block and offered it to Will.

Will examined it like it was a bug. “You’re giving me a…?” He didn’t know the French word for knife.

“Un couteau. I need you to slice the lungs.” It would make good sport if Will chose to attack him. Even if he was incapacitated, Will was unlikely to get far with all the doors locked and windows barred.

With a resigned sigh, Will accepted the cleaver and held it up to the light. Hannibal wondered what he saw reflected in the metal. Then he lifted the lungs by the trachea, arranged them neatly on the cutting board, and began trimming the fat.

“I know it’s human. You can’t buy lungs in the United States.”

Hannibal winked and began jointing a brace of pigeons. “Believe what you like. Either way, we’re having a living guest tonight.”

“*We*, as if I won’t be hooked up to the plasmapheresis machine upstairs.”

“You’ll be joining us at the table.”

The cleaver paused in the lung. “Are they like you, then?”

“Not knowingly. At least not yet.”

“Is it Dr. Du Maurier?”

Hannibal was exceedingly proud. “Very clever, Will. She’s been ordering blood work for you at the hospital. This is my way of thanking her and providing you with some enrichment.”

“More enriching for you than for us, I imagine.”

Hannibal set the pigeon bones to roast in the oven and trimmed the artichokes while Will diced the offal. Using the cutting technique Hannibal had described to him, with fingertips tucked safely behind his knuckles, Will worked methodically and showed no sign of distress. Hannibal was thrilled by both this sign of progress and the sight of his fingers slick with fat.

Will was almost done slicing the trachea into rings when his thumb slipped under the knife. He didn't react beyond dumbly watching his blood as it dripped onto the lungs and soaked into the wood grain of the cutting board.

Hannibal was at Will's side in an instant. The cut wasn't deep, but Will must have nicked a vessel to bleed this badly. Before he thought better of it, Hannibal licked the rivulet of blood off Will's thenar eminence. It was much richer than Will's tears, almost velvety on the tongue. He paused to enjoy the dense aroma and heady aftertaste.

When he came back to himself, he expected to be met with exasperation. Instead, Will's expression settled somewhere between fascination and intoxication. Ah, yes. Begrudging sadomasochism was one of the more electrifying symptoms of his empathy disorder. Hannibal watched him wrestle with his miswired urges like a rat given a dopamine lever.

When Will snapped out of his reverie, he pulled his thumb away and stuck it in his mouth.

"Contain yourself, Dracula. I still have a heart to cube."

Hannibal fetched his first aid kit and bandaged the cut. "I prefer the taste of your blood over mine. It has a sweetness that balances the coppery bite."

"Congratulations, you've seasoned me well."

When the ingredients were all prepared, Hannibal led Will upstairs to the master suite. He drew a bath while Will wandered Hannibal's bedroom, stroking the bedspread and inspecting the Ukiyo-e prints. He seemed taken aback to find their clothes mixed in the closet and hamper, but he wasn't perturbed when Hannibal undressed him and helped him step into the tub. They were both accustomed to Will's nudity by now. Heretofore, Hannibal had only given him sponge baths. Will sank into the hot water with a blissful moan.

Hannibal scrubbed him with a bar of almond soap, careful to keep his peripheral IV and sutured thigh above the water. He was pleased to note Will's improved color and muscle tone. After washing his hair, Hannibal tilted his head back and began trimming it. Curls piled up on the floor as his ears and nape were gradually revealed. Will tilted his head obediently one way, then the other, allowing Hannibal to clean the edges of his beard with a straight razor. His eyes were closed, indifferent to the scrape of the blade over his neck. In fact, he seemed to relax more with each stroke. Hannibal felt like Michelangelo chipping away at marble to free the form trapped within. When he was done, he stepped back to admire his work.

Objectively, Will was quite handsome. He was especially attractive now, with his hair slicked back and his chest flushed pink from the heat of the bath. He would look even better once he was dressed in the ensemble Hannibal had selected for him. Hannibal reflected that, more than anything that evening, he was looking forward to showing Will off.

Hannibal left Will to soak and arranged his clothes on the bed: a herringbone sport coat, beige sweater, and denim button-up. Practical and comfortable. Bespoke versions of what Hannibal suspected Will would choose for himself, had he the means. For the final touch, he retrieved Will's glasses from the nightstand drawer and perched them atop the sweater. Will would want them as a shield during dinner. With that, he went downstairs to prepare the pigeon sauce.

Will joined him half an hour later. Hannibal paused at his pigeon confit to give him a once-over. The clothes fit him perfectly.

"I feel almost human."

"Almost human?" Will was the most human person Hannibal knew. "I'm glad to hear it. Your comfort is my priority."

"A more ethical form of veal production," Will mused. "What's left to do here?"

Hannibal directed him through the rest of the cooking. They moved gracefully around each other, moving from cutting board, to oven, to stove. Will didn't hesitate at the knife block, nor did he flinch when Hannibal stood behind him to give a pan an extra stir. Soon they had three plates of pigeon with glazed carrot and three plates of skewered offal with artichoke.

The doorbell rang. Hannibal left Will in the kitchen to answer it.

Bedelia wore a black blouse, had her hair in her signature French twist, and was completely high on ketamine.

He switched from French to English for her sake. "Good evening, Bedelia."

Eyes half-lidded, she took a moment to respond. "Good evening, Hannibal."

When they rounded the stairs, Will turned from the sink where he'd been washing dishes. He was well-bathed, well-groomed, and practically glowing in the dim light. Hannibal dared anyone to say he wasn't well cared for. He wiped his hands awkwardly on his pants and looked to Hannibal for guidance.

"Hello, Will." Bedelia's expression didn't change upon seeing him, but her legs seemed to weaken. She made her way slowly to the dining table and collapsed into a seat.

Will's eyes flicked from her drugged-out stupor to Hannibal's smile.

Hannibal poured them each a glass of Chianti. "You once said that I prefer my friends to be medicated, Bedelia. Is this an attempt to appeal to my better nature?"

"It's an attempt to distance myself from the situation. Something, I see, you haven't been able to do. How close must you keep your enemies, Hannibal?"

"I've found that proximity breeds familiarity."

Will sat across from Bedelia as Hannibal brought out the pigeon appetizers. Hannibal took his seat at the head of the table and admired the enchanting scene before him.

Bedelia ignored the confit thigh and roasted breast in favor of cutting a glazed carrot into infinitesimally small pieces. Neither Will nor Hannibal ate, caught between glancing at each other and watching Bedelia's struggle. At last, she looked up from her plate and broke the silence.

"You look much better than when I last saw you, Will. How have you enjoyed your stay?" She spoke as if he were a mental patient at a high-end retreat.

Will opened his mouth, mute for a moment, then cleared his throat. "Not much sunlight, but I couldn't ask for better food. This is definitely poultry, by the way. I helped cook it." He took a bite of thigh.

Hannibal looked at him expectantly.

"It's excellent."

They turned to Bedelia, who regarded Will with thinly veiled disgust.

"If you can't beat him, join him? Is that it?"

Will shrugged. "There is no murder. Humans make murder and it matters only to us. We all contain the elements for it."

"Not everyone contains the elements to make murder," Bedelia said. "Some are only capable of righteous violence." The implication was clear: whatever progress Hannibal thought he was making with Will, he would never fully shed his morals.

"Extreme acts of cruelty require a high degree of empathy," he said. "You have some experience in that arena. Why don't you enlighten Will?"

Bedelia was taken aback. Hannibal had never before mentioned her late patient in the company of others.

She put down her fork to lift a pigeon thigh by the bone. "You see an injured bird on the side of the road, Will. How does it make you feel?"

"It's vulnerable," Will supplied. "I want to help it."

"My first thought is also that it's vulnerable. And yet I want to crush it. A primal rejection of weakness that is every bit as natural as the nurturing instinct. Of course, I wouldn't crush it. But if later I saw the same bird, still suffering, I might regret not putting it out of its misery when I had the chance." She bent over the thigh and took a delicate bite.

Hannibal cut a slice of pigeon breast with more force than intended. "And yet a bird may be healed and fly once more. Passing weakness occurs during periods of great transformation, as a caterpillar is vulnerable during metamorphosis. Does that make a moth less beautiful?"

“You may feed a caterpillar, Hannibal, you may whisper through its chrysalis, but what hatches follows its own nature and is beyond you.”

Hannibal smiled and began mentally composing the menu for Bedelia’s last supper. Whether it was next week or many years from now, he and Will would devour her together.

Will lost interest in the conversation. He stood up and headed toward the stairs. It was possible that, for just a moment, he’d forgotten his position in Hannibal’s household. Hannibal was loath to remind him, but he wasn’t done with Will for the evening.

“Dove te ne vai?” Hannibal asked. *Where are you going?* He always used Italian when Will needed handling.

Will gave him a plaintive look. “I piatti vanno lavati.” *The dishes need to be washed.*

“Sei il mio ospite. Ti conviene sederti.” *You are my guest. You had better sit down.*

Will looked like he might argue, but he returned to the table. Bedelia did not comment on the exchange.

When they had finished their pigeon, Will joined Hannibal in the kitchen to serve the offal. He murmured in Italian, “The dining room feels more like an operating theater tonight.”

“Pay her no mind. She’s but a cornered animal snapping at our hands.”

“She and I aren’t so different. Do you intend to see which of us eats the other first?”

Hannibal chuckled. “An intriguing thought, but I wouldn’t let anyone eat you but me.”

Plates served, Hannibal introduced the dish. “Coratella con carciofi, a traditional Roman recipe known as ‘the revenge of the fifth quarter,’ the ‘fifth quarter’ being the least desirable cut of meat historically sold to peasants. It has since been elevated to a favorite among all classes.”

Will picked up a skewer and took an enthusiastic bite of lung. “Hannibal says this is lamb, but I’m not so sure.”

Bedelia swallowed, hesitant to pick up her fork. Will and Hannibal watched with fascination as, eventually, she selected a piece of artichoke and brought it to her mouth.

“It’s been weeks since you stepped out, Hannibal. Everyone is wondering what has you so preoccupied. When do you intend to rejoin Baltimore society?”

“Concerts and charity galas have lost their luster for me. Lately, I’ve been considering moving abroad for a fresh start.”

“What an excellent idea.” Bedelia wiped the sauce off another piece of artichoke. “Perhaps you’ll want a new face to accompany your new life. I could help you with that, as a parting gift.”

An olive branch.

“We would need two new faces. What do you think would suit Will?”

Bedelia glanced at him. Will met her gaze over the rims of his glasses, chewing aggressively on a chunk of heart.

“A rhinoplasty and an eyelid lift. Maybe some malar implants.”

“I could never allow a rhinoplasty. Wouldn’t want to risk his sense of smell.”

“In that case, some minor injections of collagen.”

Hannibal considered Will’s face. It seemed a shame to mar it when it was already perfectly to his liking. “On second thought, I’d prefer to make any cosmetic adjustments myself.”

“What about your sixth finger?”

His polydactyly was a bigger issue. Corrective surgery would be a two-handed procedure, so he couldn’t perform it on himself. Furthermore, it would be massively invasive and risk compromising the motion and stability of his left hand. There was a doctor in Brazil he thought was up to the task, but it would take months to recover from the surgery—time he couldn’t spare when Will needed so much attention.

He held up his left hand and flexed his digitus medii. “What do you think, Will?”

“I dunno, I like it.” He seemed embarrassed to admit it, which assured Hannibal that he was telling the truth.

Elated, he turned back to Bedelia. “Then we’ll have to keep a low profile. Maybe it would be better for me to attend some social functions, as you said.”

The Long Spoon

The days slid past. Will was himself and not himself. When he wondered about events it was as though he saw them from the side, saw himself from a distance.

His world widened gradually. Beyond the white room was the sink and toilet, which he could access whenever he wanted. Then there were the bookshelves and the curtains he mustn't touch until it was night, and all the lights were out. In the corner sat a harpsichord that would produce the loveliest sounds whenever Will requested. Down the stairs was the bath, where gentle hands groomed him. He felt light and free without hair in his eyes. There were fresh flowers. Orchids, lilies, and roses. He was fed oysters and figs.

Many conversations were held in dark rooms with a single point source of light. The source of light changed day by day, sometimes a candle, sometimes a lamp, sometimes a metronome. Will talked at length about his childhood. He described the boat yards of Biloxi, Greenville, and Eerie and how much his father liked each one. He was happy when father was happy, but father rarely was.

He talked about his time working as a police officer in New Orleans. He had a partner named Peter Bridgham. Peter was a crack shot, good at his job, and braver than anyone Will ever knew, even his father. The other officers stuck him with Will because Peter was the only one who could stand him. He watched Will observe crime scenes with wonder, then invited him over to his place to discuss cases over whiskey.

Peter was the first person to ever accept Will the way he was, and he was a much better man than Will would ever be.

Will stopped talking there. This was one room of his experience that he could never enter. The monsters banged on the door from the other side.

A silver police badge slid across the table, lit in high relief by the candle.

"Peter Bridgham is downstairs, Will. Would you like to see him?"

"Hey. Sure!"

"I'm going to leave so you two can speak in private. The person who comes in next will be Peter."

"Alright, let's go!"

Footsteps down the stairs. A few minutes later, they came up again. Peter Bridgham entered, wearing his navy uniform and hat. His beard was just as full as Will remembered. The storm door slapped the wall on his way in. Woodpeckers drummed on the dead pines in Will's backyard.

"Hiya, Will. Catch anything good for me last weekend?"

Will bounded to his feet and pulled Peter into a manly embrace. It had been years since he'd held him, yet the snaps on his shirtfront felt the very same, he smelled of strong soap and tobacco, and Will sensed the great volume of his heart against him.

"I wish I had a catfish for you. How's the wife?"

"She's swell, same as always."

There were two things on the kitchen table: a bag of oranges and a cane syrup cake just like Peter's mother always made. Peter peeled an orange with his Barlow knife. The skin coiled on the tablecloth. He was long in the chair like Will's father.

"Want a slice?"

"Sure. Hey, I can't believe you came out all this way."

Will asked Peter how little Hannah was doing and Peter told him all about her. She was a fireball rocketing around now she could walk. They ate a slice of cake and two oranges apiece, spitting seeds into a bowl. Will had forgotten how strong cane syrup tasted. Like molasses.

At length, Peter's smile fell away and he addressed Will in his gruff police officer's voice.

"How you doin', Will?"

It was a serious question.

"I dunno. Not great."

"I heard what's happening up in Baltimore. Lots of people getting killed."

Will deflated. "I know. I should be working in Quantico like you said."

"Way I see it, you should be doing whatever the hell you want. You don't owe them shit."

"You can't mean that."

"I do."

They each ate another slice of orange. Peter scraped his chair back.

"I best be going now, but think about what I said."

"Aw, you just got here. Can't you stay?"

"Nobody can stay forever, Will."

Will got up to see Peter out the door. He grasped his hand one last time. It was hard letting go. "Drive safe."

And then he was gone.

Will collapsed into his seat and hid his face in his hands. Peter never cried so he wouldn't either.

Footsteps returned.

"How was Peter, Will?"

Will made a garbled noise and cleared his throat. "He was fine."

"Tell me, why did he want you to work for the FBI?"

"Said I was the best homicide detective there ever was. Shows what he knewww."

His last word distorted as his mouth turned down. The first hint of forbidden anger. No, Will wouldn't allow himself to feel it.

"What else didn't he know?"

"Didn't know to shoot Drumgo dead when he had the chance."

"No, he didn't. What happened on that day?"

"I knew Drumgo dropped those bodies in the Mississippi, but no one at NOPD believed me. Took forever to get a warrant. Our source said her base would be empty that day. I was just gonna run in and grab the evidence we needed real quick. I told Peter to stay in the car."

"But he didn't stay in the car."

"Of course he didn't, he would never leave me—" Will broke off.

"What did you find in her base?"

"We were double-crossed. There were five shooters waiting. Drumgo took her kid out of daycare that day just to fuck with us. Wore him like a body shield and hid her assault rifle under the baby blanket. Peter had her in his sights, said don't shoot and we can end this peacefully. He could've got her without hitting the kid, but his wife had just given birth the other day. I don't think he had it in him."

Will picked up the badge on the table. He rubbed it between his fingers, hot tears springing in his eyes and pouring down his cheeks.

"She shot him in the head, so I shot her. And then I shot everyone else."

He hated Peter for failing to pull the trigger when he'd never failed before. He hated that Peter would be disappointed in him now.

"He was stupid. It's all so stupid."

"How did it feel to kill Evelda Drumgo?"

Will couldn't see through his tears. "It was the best thing I ever did. But I died with her. I've been walking around dead ever since."

"You didn't die with her. You felt guilty because killing her felt so good. We don't invent our natures; they're issued to us along with our lungs and pancreas and everything else. You can try to fit the mold you think would've best pleased Peter, but that won't bring him back."

Pinpoints of red flickered in the maroon eyes before him.

"Everything must change, Will, but nothing perishes. Souls are exempt from the power of death. When they leave their first corporeal home, they always find and live in newer ones."

Hands pressed on either side of Will's temples.

"Everything you'll ever need of Peter Bridgham is right here, inside you, and subject to your judgment, not his. Never be ashamed of who you are, Will."

With those words, a hard knot loosened in Will and came undone.

***

Days passed with music and fresh flowers. The curtains remained closed, but Will could move freely about the house. When he wasn't busy at his fly-tying vise, he read his way through the complete works of Dickens or tried his amateur hand at the harpsichord. He didn't know any tunes besides *Black Mountain Rag*, and only barely at that. He was amused to hear its peppy twang played with a medieval clavier.

Today he sat in the study, flipping through a trash tabloid dated November 17th, 1983. An article about the Chesapeake Ripper debated if the serial killer's name should be changed in light of his interstate travels. He had murdered the Jacobis, a family of five, in Birmingham on October 21st, the night of the full moon. Law enforcement hadn't made any progress on the case in the month since then.

At the end of the article was a short paragraph concerning Will Graham. Last seen in Baltimore on October 8th, he was listed as a missing person, thought likely to have been killed by the Ripper. A tightly cropped photo of Will's face taken during a NOPD New Year's party accompanied the passage. Anyone with information on his whereabouts was advised to contact the phone number provided.

Will glanced at the landline on the side table before turning back to the paper.

He skimmed the article once more, looking for hints about the Jacobis, especially any pets they might have had. No photos of the crime scene or victims. Shame.

According to the lunar calendar in the November issue of *Field & Stream*, the next full moon was on Sunday, the 20th. Will wondered what day it was today.

When he closed his eyes, a face swam into view: a man with a reconstructed cleft lip and short blond hair. He ducked his head shyly, belying his barbarity. *Gateway Film Laboratory, St. Louis*. Will knew the man's name. It hovered before him, just out of reach.

He lost his train of thought when he heard the front door open downstairs. Will brightened as Hannibal came into view. He wore a three-piece suit in plaid walnut with a goldenrod tie and matching pocket square. In this dim room, he shone like the sun.

“Hello, Will. Did you finish *A Tale of Two Cities* today?”

“Not yet, I got distracted. How’s Alana?”

“Splendid. She’s deciding between a residency at Johns Hopkins and a position teaching at the FBI Academy.”

Will smiled, proud of her. “Will you be disappointed when she chooses the teaching position?”

“Of course not. In fact, I look forward to it.” Hannibal sat next to him on the couch. “Will, I’d like to take you somewhere today. I have a surprise for you, to celebrate your recovery.”

Will had been expecting this announcement ever since Hannibal had removed his IV ports over a week ago. The stitches in his chest were almost entirely dissolved.

“Alright. Where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we arrive. Go put on your coat. Would you warm up the car while I pack?”

Hannibal handed him the keys.

“Sure thing.”

Will donned his goose down parka and headed down, down, down the stairs. He unlocked the garage door and rolled it up a foot so that the exhaust could escape. Winter chill bit his fingers. He turned on the Bentley and relaxed in the passenger seat, listening to the purr of the engine.

Hannibal joined him five minutes later, carrying a suitcase.

“Are you ready, Will?”

“Yes.”

This was Will’s first sight of the daylit world in weeks. He plastered his face against the passenger window, squinting at the brick storefronts as his eyes adjusted to the harsh sun. Droves of people milled the sidewalks, more than he’d thought could possibly exist. Each had their own inner life: wells of emotion waiting to be tripped over and fallen into.

Outside of the city, sparrows and chickadees flocked together, picking the last insects off dead branches. Snapped cattails hung limp from their stalks in faded marshes and flooded ditches off the side of the highway. Narrow roads through rolling hayfields were known by numbers instead of names.

They pulled into the dirt driveway of a Postmodern house overlooking a cliff.

Will got out of the car and fell to his knees. Salt air flowed into his lungs. Seagulls cried, wheeling over the waves. He sunk his fingers into grass, lifting fistfuls of earth to his nose. Fallen leaves, rocks, mud—notes of forest floor, the memory of which he'd recently only tasted in fine wines. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed all this.

Hannibal patted his shoulder. "Come in when you're ready."

Long-fingered shadows stretched between the pines as Will wandered the surrounding forest. Mice skittered to their nightly hidey-holes. An owl flew soundlessly overhead. When the sun set, the house lit up like a stage. He felt safe, watching it from a distance.

The dining room table was dressed in cypress boughs fecund with seed cones, studded with white hyacinths and anemones. A golden apple was nestled in the centerpiece. The sight plucked a string in Will's chest, and it vibrated as Hannibal approached.

He wiped some dirt off Will's face with his thumb. "There's a warm bath waiting down the hall. I've taken the liberty of purchasing some clothes for you. They're in the bedroom closet, should you care to change."

Will noted the third place setting on the dining table. "Are we expecting company?"

"Of a sort."

Will stole a hyacinth and studied it as he soaked in the tub. Sniffing it, he recalled a former time. *In a garden, if one breaks a flower—crisp violet, poppy, straight lily erect with yellow stamens pointed high—the flower wilts, head toppled into earth. So bent the dying face of Hyacinthus.* Will crushed it and let its dozens of little flowers swirl among the suds.

In the closet were many fine sweaters and suits as well as soft flannels and fleece. The tags were all plain, embroidered only with *WG*. He selected a white button-down, a charcoal suit, and—after a moment of hesitation—a maroon necktie. Even unaccustomed to this level of dress, he did not examine himself long in the mirror, only checking to see if everything was in place.

Hannibal was preparing in the dining room, mincing caper berries as Charente butter sautéed in a copper fait-tout over his alcohol burner. A small ice storm of crystal stood before the service plates. He smiled when he saw Will.

Will could happily drown in that smile.

"Come with me. It's time you learned the privileges you command at my dinner table."

He brought Will to a mirror and had him examine his reflection. Will didn't see much that was interesting, besides Hannibal's joyous presence.

"You possess both rare beauty and rare insight," Hannibal said. "A prepossessing combination among the right company."

Will thought he was talking about his empathy. "That's all an accident."

“If comeliness were earned, you’d still be beautiful.”

Made in his image, Will thought idly. *His Creator’s design.*

Hannibal pulled the chair at the head of the table out for him. “I’ve arranged a special evening for us, Will. I warn you that some ugly things might be said. If any unpleasant remarks feel true, know that they are only momentarily so, as all things change with time. Viewed in context, even the most offensive words might be viewed as riotously funny.”

“Must you dole out life lessons now? I’m hungry.”

Hannibal poured two glasses of white Burgundy and handed one to Will. “Taste and smell are the oldest senses, and the closest to the center of the mind.”

“Parts that precede pity and morality.”

“Pity has no place at the table. The sights and sounds of dinner play in the domes of our skulls, like miracles illuminated on a church ceiling. It can be far more engaging than theater.”

“...What’s for dinner?”

“Never ask. It spoils the surprise.”

Hannibal went into the kitchen.

Will stared at the golden apple in the centerpiece—an apple of immortality. In the myths, no one ever ate from the Garden of Hesperides, except for the mischievous nymphs, who played timelessly in their eternal autumn. The grove was owned by the gods, who had no need for immortality or panacea. The apples were passed around plenty, either as the objects of quest, as gifts, or as a distraction, but they were ultimately worthless.

Hannibal returned with a middle-aged man strapped to a wheelchair with yards of duct tape covered in the front by a funeral tuxedo. Hannibal rolled him before the third place setting at the opposite end of the table.

It took a moment for Will to recognize him. It was John, the man who had spoken to him at Hannibal’s dinner party. John was not himself tonight. He gazed around the room with bulging eyes, gaping like a fish.

Hannibal took a pair of silver tongs from the sideboard and peeled off the tape covering John’s mouth.

John’s attention fell on Will. “I remember you. You’re Lecter’s *roommate*.”

“Good evening, John.”

Hannibal raised the heat on the burner and stirred the pan, browning the butterfat to beurre-noisette. “It’s a pity you never got to introduce Will to your barber. Do you approve of the haircut I gave him?”

Will's hair was swept back from his forehead. The sides no longer covered his ears.

"How does a little nobody end up sitting next to me at Lecter's dinner party, huh? I think I know."

"How do you reckon?" Will asked.

"You're his live-in *fuck toy*."

Will sipped his wine. "How did you catch him, Hannibal?"

"It wasn't difficult. Hold still, John, I'm going to take a few inches off the top."

Using a napkin, Hannibal grasped John's hair to lift the top of his skull as if it were a tureen lid, revealing the brain. He carefully set the cap aside, then took up a knife and fork to part the membranes surrounding the cerebrum.

John rolled his eyes upward as if following Hannibal's progress.

"Cervelles are composed mainly of water and lipids. In classic cuisine, they are soaked in cold water, then pressed and chilled overnight to firm them. When they are this fresh, the challenge is preventing them from disintegrating into mush in the pan."

Unwrapped, the brain was as pink-gray as old gum. Using an instrument similar to a tonsil spoon, Hannibal carved four slices from John's prefrontal cortex, dredged them in fine breadcrumbs, and set them to simmer.

"*Goosey, goosey gander, whither shall I wander?*" John sang. "*Upstairs, downstairs, and in my lady's chamber.*"

Will watched the scene, nonplussed. He knew what this was all about, of course. The narrative was clearly written in the set dressing. Here was the final golden apple, dropped into his lap. They both knew the ending already, so to make things exciting, Hannibal was allowing him to preview his fate played out on this dummy.

For their second course, like Apollo throwing his discus into the unwitting forehead of Hyacinthus, Hannibal would carve into Will's skull while he was still alive. Blood and bone would spray artfully across the table, staining the white flowers red. Perhaps Hannibal would share a morsel of Will's brain with him. He could already taste the butter.

A fitting end, he recognized.

"*There I met an old man who wouldn't say his prayers, so I took him by the left leg and threw him down the stairs.*"

Regarding his death, Will did not feel much. His life belonged to Hannibal already. He had returned Will to sanity, allowing him to appreciate the world in a way he hadn't since he'd lost Peter. A golden week of borrowed time. In return, Will's blood and breath were only elements undergoing change to fuel Hannibal's radiance, just as a source of light was burning.

"*The stairs went crack. He nearly broke his back. And all the little ducks went quack, quack, quack.*"

Will was anxious, but not for himself.

Hannibal gleefully flipped the brain slices to cook on the other side. He seemed to enjoy John's serenade as much as he did his chamber music. Occasionally he turned to Will and smiled with his eyes to share in the joke. When the slices were done, he plated them with parsley and whole caper berries still on the stems. Nasturtiums added height. He arranged the blossoms as one would the final touches of a masterpiece.

Will wondered who Hannibal would share his appetite with when he was gone. Bedelia was capable of great acts of compassionate cruelty and was already indebted to Hannibal. She might come to cherish his eccentricities with time. Alana might take longer to convince but would make a lovely companion, certainly more clever and "prepossessing" than Will. Both were excellent options. But would either woman be enough?

"*QUACK-QUACK-QUACK-QUACK-QUACK, QUACK-QUACK, QUACK, QUACK, QUACK!*"

"I confess, I thought you would be more interested in the show, Will. Is there something wrong?"

A pang of guilt. Will was ruining the mood. He put on his best smile.

"Not at all. I was just lost in thought."

Hannibal had brought out his flat silver from the warmer at the last minute and when Will lifted the knife, he felt an almost feverish heat in the handle. It cut through the brain with ease. He swiped a cube through the butter-lemon sauce, making sure to gather some minced caper, and brought it to his mouth. Gaze fixed on Hannibal, he chewed. Let him please Hannibal and fall into that pleasure one last time.

He licked sauce off his lips. "It has the texture of scrambled eggs."

From the other side of the table: "Aren't you too big to be fucking your daddy?"

Oblivious to John, they discussed Mischa. Will knew of Hannibal's sister's fate from their conversations about loss, but now Hannibal spoke in a hopeful way about her possible return. It did not seem unreasonable to Will on this day that a shattered teacup might come together again.

He expressed the hope that he might meet Mischa.

"You know how Lecter got all that money?" John yelled, his volume becoming intrusive. "He fucks old ladies to trick them into putting him in their will!"

Excusing himself, Will walked down the length of the table to stand behind their guest. He cupped John's chin in one hand and gripped the base of his skull with the other. A sharp

application of torque. A snap. Then John's head hung forward, limp. Watery pink fluid dribbled from his braincase onto the napkin spread over his lap.

Complete serenity.

Will picked up the apple from the centerpiece. Gold leaf crumbled in his palm. He rubbed it with his thumb, revealing red skin spangled with tiny white stars.

He understood now what true immortality was. It wasn't his glorification through tableau that would live on in the newspapers. It was what he could do for Hannibal, to live on in him, as Peter lived on in Will.

He split the apple's skin with his teeth and sucked the sweet juice.

***

All sentient beings form, from early experience matrices, frameworks by which later perceptions are understood. Hannibal had plumbed the depths of Will's psyche and found a matrix split into negatives and positives.

On one side was the rejection of his brawling failure of a father, which, in Will's mind, connected violence to shame. On the other was the acceptance he had found in the upstanding Peter Bridgham, which connected selflessness to love. Combined, these traces fettered Will's authentic impulses and saddled him with low self-esteem.

But there was flexibility in these two complexes. Hannibal had spent weeks detangling them using their crosswise connections. Will loved his violent father and he hated Peter's sacrifice. He could kill Freddy Lounds, but he couldn't kill Hannibal. Now Will could kill a near stranger as long as it was for Hannibal's sake. Perhaps it was another form of self-sacrifice, but it was a step in the right direction.

Will returned to his seat, gold dust smeared across his lips and chin. The sight set off in Hannibal a quivering elation he could scarcely contain.

"Is your heart racing, Will?"

Will shook his head. He stared forward at John's corpse and set his jaw.

A low heart rate was a true indicator of one's capacity for violence. Will was genetically predisposed to it. Killing John was changing the physical structures of his brain, changing the way he thought, and opening him to the possibility of his true self. Now was the critical juncture. Hannibal needed him in an open state of mind for what would come next.

"Don't go inside. You may want to retreat, as the glint of the rail tempts us when we hear the approaching train, but stay with me."

"Where else would I go?"

Hannibal stood and offered Will his hand. Will seemed surprised but took it, getting gold dust on Hannibal's fingers.

Dessert was held in the drawing room. A soufflé and glasses of Château d'Yquem before the fire. Deep notes of burning logs under the perfume of wine. A bronze statuette of a stag sat on the side table by Will's elbow. Will absently loosened his necktie.

They discussed teacups, time, and the rules of disorder.

"And so I came to believe," Hannibal said, "that there must be a place in the world for Mischa, a prime place vacated for her, and I began to think, Will, that the best place in the world was yours."

Will considered this as he sampled the wine's aroma. "If there was a perfect place for Mischa in this world, and I'm not saying there isn't, why wouldn't it be within you? I've learned to hold Peter between my temples. Surely there's room for Mischa between yours."

Hannibal was pleased, either with the idea or Will's cleverness, though he felt vaguely concerned that he'd built better than he knew.

"You can give me your answer later," Will continued, "but if that's what you really want, I'll do it. I never had a brother."

"Nor I."

Will tried to picture it. "As brothers, we couldn't stay in Baltimore. Would we go to Florence?"

"We'd live wherever you like. I imagine we'll have to move frequently once the dragon is caught."

Will didn't react to the mention of the dragon.

"Do you suppose we would hug?"

Hannibal's heart leapt as he thought of the embrace Will had given Peter Bridgham. "I suppose we would."

Will set his wine on the table. "Could we try it now?"

"Be my guest."

Before Hannibal could stand, Will straddled his lap and hugged him to his chest. Hannibal wrapped him in his arms in turn, listening to his steady heartbeat, so familiar after the days of the ECG monitor. Will's body heat mingled with the glow of the fireplace. Terrible, bone-deep satisfaction bloomed in him. He dug his fingers into the cashmere of Will's suit jacket.

Will settled closer, then stiffened and drew back. Hannibal almost protested the few inches that came between them.

A hand at his groin.

"Is this for your brother, Dr. Lecter?"

From his youth Hannibal had rarely visited his fellow creatures for physical pleasure. He was led to the postures of Venus accidentally from time to time and thought of them as trifles to engage with as a means to an end. He had no real concept of the thousand forms of Love on which the inventive satiety of pleasure ventured, nor which of them might satisfy him most.

He recalled a 5th century BC Grecian red-figure vase he'd encountered during his study of *Primavera*. Painted five hundred years before Ovid wrote *The Metamorphoses* and over a thousand years before Botticelli's time, it pictured Zephyrus with wings outstretched, holding the youthful figure of Hyacinthus aloft, pressed together from chest to knee. This had been Hannibal's first cognizance of pedication.

Now, faced with Will's gleaming curiosity, Hannibal came undone. Will's jacket could not come off fast enough, nor his tie. He paused at Will's trousers when awareness of his actions caught up to him.

Will kissed him deeply, tasting of golden wine. Hannibal let his head fall back into Will's hands and inhaled the musk of his arousal—arousal for him. He hardly knew what to do with his mouth except to find skin and taste.

Trousers off. He felt the long scar running up the side of Will's thigh. Flesh yielded to his fingers as marble beneath a sculptor's tool.

He bore Will up and pressed them together as he had seen on the vase. Will arched against him, caught Hannibal's cock between his thighs, and squeezed. The intercrural space quickly became wet from Hannibal's excitement. Frenzied thrusts.

Hannibal tried to bite Will's chest, but Will yanked his head back by his hair. His teeth ached. Will's bite mark, faded pink, burned anew on his forearm. Surely Will wouldn't deny him this. He held Will's eyes, begging, knowing he could read his every desire as easily as if they were scrawled across his face.

Will punished him with another hair yank, harder this time. The pain only heightened sensation. He pushed faster between Will's legs, hot and wet. With the realization that pair bonds worked two ways, Hannibal came.

Boneless, he fell to his knees on the carpet.

Will sat before him, still hard. His spread legs were slick with Hannibal's come.

Hannibal salivated. He looked up at Will, supplicant. Would he be trusted…?

"Yes, you can put it in your mouth."

Oh. The slide of Will's dick over his tongue. Swallowing salt and alkalinity. Teeth tucked away but itching. His fingertips dug into Will's ass. Hannibal was but a raw recruit to this game, and he looked to Will for guidance. A smile of approval, then hands in his hair dragged him close.

Hannibal's perception of time went hazy. He felt a new building attach itself to his memory palace. It was the George Peabody Library, lamplit at night. Its thousand bookshelves stood empty, save for one containing the history of his acquaintanceship with Will. The Hobbs profile, the lopsided clock face, and the bloodied scarf sat on a shelf. To these, he added the core of a golden apple.

Will curled over his head and whimpered. He slipped a thumb into Hannibal's mouth for a moment to feel his canines, adding to the flavor profile. Hannibal thought of the CSF still in the freezer, all the blood and tissue samples he'd collected and sent to the lab. Here it was, here was what he had always wanted. He worked hard to draw it out of Will until, at last, *ah*.

He kept sucking until Will was done, then held his soft cock in his mouth some more. It seemed a shame to swallow, but he did so with the reverence of a Christian taking the communion wafer, making Will twitch.

He sat back on his heels, eyes closed, savoring the moment. For the first time in years, not a single thought was etched on the clear glass of his mind. He vaguely registered the whisper of Will's skin slipping over the upholstery.

Then the bronze stag cracked over his head, and Hannibal fell forward, unconscious.

A Glass Bubble Out in the Stars

Chapter Notes

Blanket trigger warning for disturbing Red Dragon things.

Will set the stag back on the side table and bent to check on Hannibal. His breathing and pulse were normal. Minimal blood. Thank God. The shine of saliva and come on Hannibal's lips made his legs weak. His brain stuttered uselessly for a moment, fogged over from the most powerful orgasm of his life.

He had to work quickly before Hannibal woke up, which could be any second. He dressed himself, only bothering with his pants and shirt, then stumbled into the dining room, where John still slumped in his wheelchair. No second course. No blood splatters on the white hyacinth. Will couldn't believe his luck. He gulped water from a crystal carafe and slipped one of the many knives into his pocket.

He found a pen and paper on which he scribbled a note: *Come at earliest convenience*, followed by the address of an old nursing home outside of St. Louis. He left the note on the table in the drawing room. A short hunt for the keys, then Will peeled out of the driveway, pushing one hundred down the dark country road. He fixed his cold stare west.

Will remembered everything about Francis Dolarhyde now. For Hannibal, Dolarhyde was the most dangerous thing on this earth. The more he killed, the more likely he was to be caught. Will marveled that he hadn't been already when he'd told Crawford exactly who he was and how he was choosing his victims. But maybe after the next family died—probably on the 20th, if it hadn't passed yet—Crawford would pull his head out of his ass long enough to see that Will was right about the home video.

Whether or not Dolarhyde was captured, he could send in an anonymous tip about the Chesapeake Ripper at any time. And he would love nothing more than to serve Hannibal to the Red Dragon. As for Will—well, Will didn't like to think about what he wanted to do to him. For Hannibal to ever be safe, Will had to get rid of Dolarhyde, and he had to do it now.

Dolarhyde was in either St. Louis or Baltimore, but based on his recent trip to Birmingham, St. Louis was more likely. Will prayed that he hadn't followed them to the cliffside house, where Hannibal was now a sitting duck.

If the nursing home was vacant, that would be an issue. Will only had so much time before Hannibal caught up to him, and then who knew what would happen. Will had a good plan. It would solve more problems than one. But he knew Hannibal wouldn't approve of it, so he hadn't given him a chance to object. Hannibal wouldn't be pleased.

It was a twelve-hour drive to St. Louis. Will couldn't cut down on his time too much without being pulled over—possibly the worst-case scenario, as he didn't have his license, he was a missing person, and he'd stolen Hannibal's car. Even the FBI would be able to connect the dots on that story. He tried to guess how long Hannibal would take to get there. He had no idea. It all depended on how fast Hannibal could find a vehicle and what the flight schedules were like.

At one in the morning, Will stopped at a 24-hour gas station in Ohio. He put the pump in the Bentley and fearfully studied each vehicle that pulled into the station. It would be just like Hannibal to have a second car up his sleeve.

He didn't think anyone outside of Maryland would recognize him. Even if the locals followed the Tattler, with neat hair and no glasses he looked different enough from the picture of his previous self. He rummaged around the glove compartment until he found some bills, then went inside.

It was hard to feel confident with dried come sticking your pants to your inner thighs. When Will drew stares from a handful of customers, he thought for a second that they recognized him. Then he realized that he'd done a woeful job buttoning up his shirt. And maybe one of them noticed he wasn't wearing underwear.

He brought six jerrycans of Servco Supreme gasoline to the register, then hurried over to the convenience section and tried to remember what was edible in places like this. After a month of Hannibal's cooking, he didn't think most processed snacks would agree with his stomach. He grabbed several cans of Chef Boyardee, a jug of water, a t-shirt, a pair of cargo shorts, and a Rand McNally road map of Missouri. The t-shirt had a large cartoon bass on it captioned *Hookin' Ain't Easy*.

He was delighted to see a collection of pocket knives for sale—much more useful than the steak knife in the car. He selected a three-inch spring-assisted drop point blade.

On the way to the register, his eyes automatically slid past the display of condoms and male enhancements. Then he stopped short. He picked up some packets of lube. *Don't think about it*.

The cashier eyed him. "Nice shirt," he said.

It was a nice shirt, but Will didn't think it was meant to be a compliment.

"Do you have a restroom I could use?"

The cashier smirked, which was honestly understandable considering Will's purchases and state of dress, but he handed him a key.

After putting the gasoline in the trunk, Will went around the back of the station. The toilet was shockingly neglected, but he didn't care as long as the sink worked. He scrubbed his whole body with hand soap, sloshing water onto the moldy tile in his haste. He even gargled and ran his hair under the tap. Gold dust ran down the drain. He couldn't leave a single trace of Hannibal on his body.

Now the hard part.

Will didn't completely understand the mechanics of anal sex, but he had nothing if not imagination. He pictured Mrs. Sherman's mutilated genitals before he could stop himself. That was a mistake. It took him a minute to get his breathing under control so he could continue.

He ripped open a packet of lube and squeezed it onto his fingers. This was just like servicing a boat engine, he told himself. In his mind, he ran through the steps for replacing the fuel filter on a Mercury outboard two-stroke motor. He couldn't waste too much time with this. He got it done quickly, with no idea how much of a difference it would even make.

He changed into the gas station clothes and emerged from the bathroom, half expecting Hannibal to be waiting outside the door. No one was there. Damp and shivering in the winter air, Will both looked and felt more like his old self.

"Do you know the date?" he asked the cashier as he handed back the key.

"The 18th. Or wait, I guess it's the 19th now it's past midnight."

Two days before the full moon.

He warmed up in the car, pouring Chef Boyardee into his mouth straight from the can. The knife fit perfectly in one of the side pockets of the cargo shorts. He practiced slipping it in and out as he located Dolarhyde's address on the road map. The knife opened and closed with a quiet snick.

Nothing left but to drive.

Six hours on I-70 flew by fast. No need for caffeine when he was this hopped-up on adrenaline. His progress slowed after he left the highway. He kept making wrong turns and needed to consult the map. The road twisted northward toward the sleepy suburb of St. Charles.

At eight in the morning, he pulled up to the curb of a fenced-off orchard, long-neglected. Dead and twisted trees stood over saplings. This late in November, uneaten fruit crumbled damply in the shadows, returning to the black earth. A long gravel drive stretched through the orchard, its end obscured by thick fog. A sign on the stone wall read: Dolarhyde Nursing Home.

Will rested his forehead on the steering wheel. His body was betraying him. He couldn't think about what he had to do next without weakness surging up his arms and shoulders. The uncanny feeling that his joints were about to fall apart. It wasn't killing Dolarhyde that made him nervous. It was the part that came before it.

He couldn't do this alone. But Hannibal had taught him that he was never alone.

He wasn't staring down that misty gravel drive. He was walking up the soggy lawn to his little one-story shack down in Louisiana. He opened the storm door to find Peter Bridgham

sat at the kitchen table, dressed in his uniform and sipping a mug of coffee.

Hannibal was there too, frying eggs and sausage at the stove. The vase of white lilies on the table was obviously his addition. He must have just said something funny because Peter was laughing. Will hadn't realized he remembered what his laugh sounded like.

Peter downed his mug and scraped his chair back. "Ready to head out, Officer Graham?"

Will looked down at himself. He was wearing his uniform, .38 Special holstered at his hip.

"Yep."

"Buck up, we got a big day ahead of us." Peter swung on his coat. "He coming too?"

Hannibal cocked his head, letting Will decide.

"I think he'd better."

Will started the car and turned into the gravel driveway. The mist parted, revealing a stone fountain filled with rainwater and fallen leaves. A decrepit mansion. Overgrown hedges nearly swallowed the footpaths surrounding the property. A white van was already parked to the side.

Dolarhyde was home.

Will made no effort to hide his approach. He drove around the fountain and crunched to a stop in front of the house.

One last feel of the knife in his pocket. Breathe in, breathe out.

Will exited the car.

The front door burst open and Dolarhyde stormed out wearing a silk kimono, pistol in hand. He didn't aim it at Will, but the muzzle drifted up towards the Bentley.

Damn it. Will would take a bullet for the tires on that thing. Whatever happened, Hannibal needed to be able to drive it off the property. But Will couldn't look at the gun. Like the time at Druid Hill Park, he couldn't show a lick of fear.

Dolarhyde stalked toward the car and pointed his gun in the windows. Empty cans and Will's come-stained pants. The steak knife was hidden in the glove compartment. He popped the trunk and looked inside. The cans of gasoline didn't raise his suspicions.

Then he turned to Will with intense, unblinking eye contact. This was the glowering face from Will's dreams, filled with so much pain and so much rage. He had never once smiled in the span of his miserable existence. Will let himself tumble down that well of madness.

"How did you find this place?"

“The video. Before I was taken, during the investigation, I figured out how you chose the Shermans.” Will paused to arrange his face into a combination of distress and indifference. *You’re vulnerable. You’re an injured bird on the side of the road*. “I killed the Ripper. Sorry to intrude like this, but I didn’t know where else to go.”

Dolarhyde leaned toward him, almost imperceptibly. “Are you better?”

“Yeah, I’m better.”

“Do you… remember?”

I know what you want. I’m good at that. Knowing.

Will smiled. “It took a while, but I remember everything, D.”

Dolarhyde took a moment to process that. Will felt his trepidation. It was Will’s job to manage that fear.

“Do you want to come in?”

“I’d love to.”

The mansion’s interior was better maintained than its exterior. No dust. Clean wallpaper. Beyond an ancient grandfather clock in the foyer was a spiral staircase.

Dolarhyde had been in the middle of breakfast when Will arrived. A pot of oatmeal was hot on the stove. He served Will a bowl and poured him a glass of orange juice.

“I’ll be right back.” He left Will in the kitchen.

Starving, Will shoveled spoonfuls of the oatmeal into his mouth. He wandered the first floor with the bowl, looking for a blanket to warm himself up. Antique single-paned windows didn’t keep heat in so well. Will draped a quilt around his shoulders and sat on the couch in the parlor. There was a projector, a movie screen, and a TV along with a pile of VHS tapes with green covers.

Dolarhyde returned. He’d changed out of his kimono and had even thought to bring Will a sweater. Will pulled it on and zipped it up to his neck. He caught a glimpse of the pistol tucked into the back of Dolarhyde’s pants as he sat down.

“How did you escape?”

A fiddly question. How to answer without raising suspicion? “I hit him over the head with a statue while he was distracted. Impact crushed his skull.”

“...Did you change him?”

Hannibal unthinkably undignified: naked, gunshot in his torso, mirror shards in his eyes and mouth. Blood and wine splattered across the carpet.

“I didn’t. I thought leaving it at a head injury would give us more options.”

Dolarhyde blinked.

“I arranged his body to make it look like an accident. Whoever cleans out his house will find plenty of evidence to name him the Ripper. They’ll blame him for all the families you changed. If you want to stop, now’s your chance.” This was nonsense, since Hannibal's DNA wouldn't match any of the biological evidence found at the Red Dragon crime scenes, but that didn't seem to matter to Dolarhyde.

He scowled at the floor. “I tried to stop before.”

Will knew that it was because of him.

To someone who has dwelled in darkness all their life, a fresh touch of love can hurt ten times more than the familiar ache of solitude. For Dolarhyde, this went beyond understanding, beyond friendship. Will was neither man nor woman, but a living vessel. Dolarhyde thought about Will. He thought about Will’s weight in his arms. He thought about holding Will down until loss of blood made him quiver like a bird. When the pressure of his love became too intense, he relieved it by tossing other families to the Dragon.

“He wants to change me,” Will said.

Dolarhyde didn’t deny it.

“You’re stronger than the Dragon now. What if you shared Him with me instead?”

Dolarhyde slowly looked up. A revelation. “I followed your suggestion. I used candles.”

“Was I right?”

“Yes. It looked wonderful on film. Want to see?”

Will’s breath caught. This was dangerous.

“Show me how you changed Mrs. Lounds.”

Dolarhyde closed the curtains and turned off the lamps. A roll of film went in the projector.

Over the ceiling fixture was a rotating light machine that made varicolored dots of light crawl over the walls, the floor, their skin. Will might have been reclining on the acceleration couch of a space vehicle, in a glass bubble, out in the stars. When he closed his eyes, he thought he could feel the light move over him. There was no more down or up. The light machine turned faster as it got warm, and the dots swarmed, flowed over the furniture in angular streams, fell in meteor showers down the walls.

There was one place shielded from the light. Dolarhyde had placed a piece of cardboard near the machine, and it cast a shadow over the movie screen.

Dolarhyde sat on the couch, several feet away from Will. He thumbed the drop switch at his side to start the projector. A white rectangle sprang on the screen, grayed and streaked as the leader moved past the lens, and then a toy poodle bounded out the backdoor of a house, shivering and wagging its stump of a tail. It was followed by a shapely woman with elaborately coiffed hair. She wasn't much older than Freddy Lounds, maybe in her late thirties.

The camera swayed and close-up leaves obscured the shot. Then it refocused. Zoom in on Mrs. Lounds. She was rubbing her arms, silently calling for the dog to come back inside.

Cut to a badly lit shot of Dolarhyde in his own bedroom. He was standing nude before a watercolor print—presumably *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*. He was wearing combat glasses, the close-fitting wraparound plastic ones favored by hockey players. He had an erection which he improved with his hand.

The focus blurred as he approached the camera with stylized movements, hand reaching to change the focus as his face filled the frame. The picture quivered and sharpened suddenly to a close-up of his mouth, his disfigured upper lip rolled back, tongue out through the teeth, one rolling eye still in frame. The mouth filled the screen and engulfed the lens.

A bouncing blur in a harsh movie light resolved into a bed and Mrs. Lounds thrashing. A dark spot on her nightdress spread as she tried to stand up. She was pulled down, and the camera fell backwards, showing a flash of molding on the ceiling.

A pulse picked up in Will's head. Hot pressure built behind his eyes.

The screen went black for five seconds and then the tic of a splice.

The camera was steady now, on a tripod. The movie light was dimmer, allowing the flicker of candlelight to play over the scene. All five were dead. Mirror shards in their eyes and mouths. Arranged. Three children were seated against the wall facing the bed. Mrs. Lounds lay under the covers.

Rob Lounds sat propped against the headboard. A bullet hole in the center of his forehead, head lolled to the side. Lank blond hair and thick neck, just like his son.

Will was covered in a sheen of sweat, hyper aware of each sensation: the scratch of the pilling upholstery, the cold zipper on his neck, the click of his eyelids with each blink. In the hospital in New Orleans, Rob Lounds leered over him, a distorted wax mask behind the lens of his camera. Flashing lights. Words slurring, incomprehensible and demonic.

Will gripped the silenced nine-millimeter and shot Rob Lounds in the head. He shot Drumgo in the head. He shot Peter in the head. Their faces overlapped and blurred, haloed by triplicate explosions of blood. The muzzle blast sent shockwaves of energy up Will's arms, up his shoulders, shaking his vertebrae all the way to the top of his skull.

In the parlor, his hearing went cottony. He thought about Freddy Lounds and wondered what kind of protective custody he was in.

The film continued. Dolarhyde came into the picture from the left with the stylized movements of a Balinese dancer. Blood-smeared and naked except for his glasses and gloves, he mugged and capered among the dead. He approached the far side of the bed, Mrs. Lounds's side, took the corners of the covers, whipped them off the bed and held the pose as if he were a matador.

In the ensuing scene, Dolarhyde lost all grace and elegance in motion, rooting piglike with his bottom carelessly turned toward the camera. There were no dramatic pauses, no sense of pace or climax, just brutish frenzy. Will's attention drifted back to Robert Lounds, whose head bobbed in time with the shaking mattress.

Sudden silence when the film ended and the reel stopped clicking. Will looked at Dolarhyde and saw that Dolarhyde was looking at him, engulfed in the meteor shower of the light machine. He was hard.

"It's not perfect," Dolarhyde said, "but I know how to do it better next time."

"You have plans for tomorrow?"

"Come with me." His voice was hoarse with desperation.

Will's skin crawled. That awful doubling of nausea and arousal. He steeled himself and leaned into one now, wetting his bottom lip with his tongue. Heat entered his gaze.

"Alright."

Dolarhyde slammed into him. The sweater came off, then the bass t-shirt was torn away. Dolarhyde struggled with the cargo shorts for a moment and Will was afraid he would feel the pocketknife, but then they were thrown on the ground as well. Will tried to see where the pants landed, but Dolarhyde's thick shoulder blocked his view.

"Your heart is pounding," Dolarhyde said, hand on Will's chest.

Alive for now, Will thought. Then horrible pain. It shot all the way up his spine to his throat, where Will swallowed a scream. His neck muscles worked as he tried not to writhe. There was no running from this.

He observed the scene from a distance. Dots of lights spun sickeningly across Dolarhyde's clothed back—where Will had seen the tattoo of the Great Red Dragon in the film. The pistol was still tucked in his pants. Good to know for later. He gripped Will's waist with bruising force. That was good. Plenty of fingerprints and saliva. Good, good. Dolarhyde wasn't wearing the set of teeth that matched the ones on Mrs. Sherman and the others, but a bite mark would still be useful…

Will's body jerked. It was an autonomic reaction to pain, like the instinct to pull away from a hot iron.

Hands flew up to choke him with tremendous force. Will knew that the sexual and fighting responses were closely linked for Dolarhyde. Mrs. Sherman's neck appeared in his mind's

eye. A flash of fear that his trachea would be crushed against his vertebrae like hers.

Will spluttered and tried to relax. He hissed with what little air he had. "*D*."

Dolarhyde growled and lifted them both up, rearranging them so that he sat with Will straddling his lap. He controlled Will's hips as easily as if he was jerking himself off. Will stifled a yell. A fresh angle with new pain.

"You never got to taste mine." He guided Dolarhyde's face to his neck, careful to avoid touching his disfigured mouth. He opened his eyes, preparing to leave his body again.

Hannibal stood expressionless in the doorway of the parlor, camouflaged by the star shower of the light machine. He wore a simple sweater, no suit or tie. Will had never seen him outside of the house without a dress shirt, so at first Will thought he must be hallucinating, but then he saw the glint of a linoleum knife.

A swoop of sickening guilt. This wasn't how he'd wanted Hannibal to find him.

Dolarhyde bit viciously into his neck, cutting off Will's train of thought. Hannibal's face twitched into a snarl.

Will shouted and dug his fingers into the upholstery, riding out the pain. Locking eyes with Hannibal made it easier somehow. Not pleasurable, per say, but almost bearable. Will was too far gone to register Hannibal's emotions. Maybe he was enjoying Will's agony.

Will raised a finger to his lips. *Shush*.

Ignoring the warning, Hannibal crept forward. He had crossed half the distance to the couch when a floorboard creaked under his foot.

A frozen second of shock, then Dolarhyde's teeth ripped out of Will's neck as he shoved him away. He whipped around, reaching for his pistol.

Without thinking, Will grabbed Dolarhyde's hand. A shot fired and Will felt a punch in his abdomen. He wrenched Dolarhyde's thumb backwards until the pistol fell. Dolarhyde kicked Will away, digging his heel into Will's gut.

Before Dolarhyde could dive for the pistol, Hannibal jumped over the couch and aimed for his throat with the linoleum knife. Dolarhyde caught Hannibal's wrist before it landed. He twisted and threw Hannibal to the side, then stalked toward Hannibal's prone form.

Will scrambled for his pocketknife, leapt forward, and stabbed Dolarhyde several times in the back. Slick with blood, the knife slipped out of his hand, lodged in Dolarhyde's trapezius.

Dolarhyde roared, wrenched the knife out of his shoulder, and stabbed it into Will's cheek. He used it as a handle to lift Will into the air, digging it into his hard palate. Blood gushed from Will's mouth as he kicked futilely.

Hannibal's arm wrapped around Dolarhyde's waist and hooked the linoleum knife into his stomach. A hideous ripping sound as the knife tore through him. Dolarhyde dropped Will.

Blood burst out of his gut and showered over Will's head and chest. Dolarhyde fell to his knees.

Will staggered to his feet, meeting Hannibal's eyes over Dolarhyde's head. He yanked the pocketknife out of his face, considered it, then stabbed Dolarhyde between the clavicle and second rib. He stared up at Will, mouthed something soundlessly, and fell over.

Nude and drenched in blood, Will lurched over Dolarhyde's body to Hannibal.

"You okay?" he slurred. One side of his mouth didn't work so well. He thought Hannibal looked okay. He couldn't tell if there were spots in his vision or if it was the light machine.

"Will." Hannibal was breathing hard. He surveyed Will's body and pressed a hand against his abdomen. "What were you thinking?"

Definitely spots in his vision. He leaned away from Hannibal so as not to get blood on his clothes. "Whatever you drove here, tow it away with his van. Get your car back to Baltimore."

"You need medical attention."

"I gotta clean up here first."

Hannibal looked at the pool of blood Dolarhyde lay in, skeptical.

"We burn this place down, and I tell everyone he kidnapped me." Will staggered to the telephone in the corner. It had a dial tone. "Could you get the gas from your trunk?"

Suddenly, it was hard to breathe. Will looked down at his abdomen where a perfectly round bullet hole was seeping blood in time with his heartbeat. Legs failing, he slid down the wall to the floor, and curled over the wound to hold it.

Hannibal didn't move. Will watched the gears turn in his head. This gravely injured, there was no way for Will to resist if he decided to keep him in captivity. And Will had knocked him out only yesterday. Was it worth trusting him now? Maybe it would be better to leave him here to die.

Now that Will's adrenaline was fading, he could feel coldness spreading up his extremities. He tried to speak, but all that came out of his mouth were moans. More blood gurgled out his mouth. At last, he managed, "I'm—sorry."

He blinked and Hannibal was gone. He wondered if he was coming back or if that was the last Will would ever see of him.

Strange stillness, except for the goddamn spinning lights making Will dizzy. A minute passed. He tried to stay conscious, focusing on steady breath and his mantra of moans.

Then a scraping noise came from across the room.

With horror, Will saw shadows move under the couch. Then Dolarhyde rose by inches over the back. He held his guts in one hand, the pistol in the other. The pocketknife was still wedged in his chest.

“Son of a bitch.” The muzzle shook violently as he took aim.

Will barely managed to roll to his feet before Dolarhyde pulled the trigger. One, two shots. The side table holding the phone splintered. Will flung himself behind the projector, gut screaming in excruciating pain. Fresh, hot blood sluiced down his side.

“Pig. Idiot. Trash. Fool.”

More shots. Three, four, five, six. The projector exploded and collapsed.

Will couldn’t tell if he’d been hit, but he didn’t have time to check. The pistol held eight more rounds.

He tried to rise to his feet, thinking to disarm him, when a blurred mass slammed into Dolarhyde’s back. Will thought it was Ladon at first, but then the form resolved into Hannibal. He jerked Dolarhyde’s head back and ripped out his trachea with his teeth. A torrent of blood spurted from the crater in his neck as the two toppled over together.

Gunshots hit the ceiling. Seven, eight, nine. The sounds of a struggle Will couldn’t see beyond the couch. He panicked for a moment.

Then Hannibal stood up, holding the pistol.

Will sagged, two hands tight on his belly, not caring when his face ground into the floorboards. Hannibal dragged him into a sitting position and patted his face until Will focused on him. Blood covered Hannibal’s lips and chin.

“Stay with me, Will.”

“Mnnnuh.”

“Apply pressure to both the entry and exit wounds. Yes, there on your back. He missed your major arteries, so we have time.”

“Mnnn.”

“It'll take me thirty minutes to return the rental car. Don’t fall asleep, no matter what.”

“Han...”

And then he was gone.

Staying awake was easier said than done. Will didn’t want to feel the pain anymore, and his purpose was complete now that Dolarhyde was dead. Hannibal was safe. There was nothing more to do. In fact, giving up had its advantages. It would put him out of reach of Hannibal’s

wrath. Will wouldn't have to deal with him, the hospital, the FBI, or the newspapers. He wouldn't have to answer to anyone ever again.

His only motivation was the thought of Hannibal sitting alone at his table, eating a meal for one. *Stupid*, Will thought. *He wouldn't miss you*. But that stupid image of Hannibal's loneliness, real or imagined, made him hold on.

"Looks like you really shat the bed this time." Peter's voice.

Will almost laughed in disbelief and ended up coughing. *Bastard. You got to die instantly.*

"Aw, come on. I'm not letting you through the pearly gates with that attitude."

I'm not going to heaven, you ass.

"Yeah, I guess not. Hey, d'you remember the address?"

What?

"Will, can you read this address for me?"

Will opened his eyes. Hannibal was holding a handwritten note in front of him.

"Mnnn."

A phone handset was held to his mouth.

"Focus, Will. 3612 Oak Ridge Drive…"

Will parroted the address.

Through the line: "Sir, what is the nature of your emergency?"

"I've—been shot."

The sound of fluid splashing across the floor. The smell of gasoline.

"What's your name?"

"Will Graham."

"Can you tell me exactly what happened?"

"I—"

Hannibal scooped him up off the floor. Will shouted in pain and the phone clattered to the ground. Through the foyer and out the front door. Hannibal sat him up against the stone fountain in the driveway, then went back inside.

An inferno exploded in the parlor. Seconds later, Hannibal returned, brushing ash from his sweater. His face was closed.

“Ask for me as soon as you’re out of surgery.”

Will nodded jerkily. They regarded each other.

“Go.” If Will went through all that just for some first responders to see the Bentley turning out of the driveway, he would pitch a fit.

Hannibal left.

Will watched the mansion burn. After one minute, he could feel the heat radiating off the building. He imagined Dolarhyde’s body roasting, the film reels melting, and the Gateway VHS tapes pooling into a puddle by the TV. After three minutes, the windows in the parlor shattered outward. Will was shielded from most of the glass by a low hedge, but one shard clipped his forehead. After four minutes, the fire spread through the foyer to the kitchen. No saving it now.

Hearing the first sirens in the distance, he allowed himself to pass out.

The Burning Heart

Saturday, November 19th, 1983

Will went in and out of consciousness in the operating room. His head, chest, and stomach didn't throb together. It was more of a syncopation. Three trauma surgeons hid behind a blue sheet to work on his abdomen, but Will could feel everything they were doing and it didn't feel great. The anaesthesiologist had given him a muscle relaxant but had dubbed it too dangerous to put him on nitrous oxide. Will glared daggers at the man. He tried to speak around his breathing tube, to demand sedation, but a great ache filled the right side of his head as he moved his jaw.

Between doses of pain medication, Will's anxiety rose and he struggled in his bindings. Behind their surgical masks, the doctor's faces morphed into those of his psychiatrists from New Orleans. *This is the end*, his mind told him. *They're going to let you die*.

It was sick, but Will was grateful to Hannibal at that moment. Without a month of raw exposure to the smell of antiseptic, the glint of needles and scalpels, and the beep of the patient monitor, Will would be little more than an animal right now. As it was, he may be on the verge of a panic attack, but he was able to contain himself to some extent.

A surgical implement moved deep within him, and he passed out once more.

He was in the ICU when he woke up. The clock on the wall said three.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them next it was ten o'clock.

Someone was to the side of him. Cautiously, he turned his eye. It was Crawford, looking grim. He tried to speak but felt the tug of stitches and bandages on his cheek.

Will made writing motions on the sheet beneath his hand.

Crawford slid his notebook under his hand and put a pen between his fingers.

"body in mansion," he wrote.

"They're still putting out spot fires. We'll dig around the remains of the house as soon as it's safe." Crawford shifted in his seat. "Look, Will, I'm sorry we didn't get to you sooner. But you got the bastard. It was all you."

"I said St. Louis."

"There weren't any videos or receipts from Gateway at the Jacobi house. Turns out Mr. Jacobi's estranged son took them when he collected his personal belongings. Bad luck and short sightedness on my part."

Will couldn't truly be angry at Crawford, not when his incompetence had kept Hannibal safe. Still, he wrote, "idiot," then after a pause, "rape kit."

Crawford grimaced. "I'll tell the nurse when she comes in."

Will wrote down a phone number.

"You want me to call someone for you?"

Will underlined the number several times.

Crawford left to find the nurse. He returned with a telephone, which he plugged into the jack underneath the patient monitor. He sat the base on his lap as he dialed.

"Hello, this is Jack Crawford. I'm calling on behalf of Will Graham. … Yes, he's been found. I'm sitting next to him in the ICU. … Gunshot wound to the abdomen and stab to the face. He can't speak right now, but I can hold the phone up to his ear if you want. … Alright, here goes."

Crawford held the receiver against the non-bandaged side of Will's face. The voice on the other end of the line was like heaven to his ears.

"Oh my God, Will, are you ok? How did they find you?" Alana asked.

Will meant to write "I'm ok," but he ended up writing, "I missed you."

Crawford related the message.

"I missed you too. Where are you? Can I come see you?"

"ask Crawford address."

Crawford told her the name of the hospital.

"I'll come as soon as I can. God, Will." Her voice broke. "I can't believe you're alive. I wish you could talk."

Will grunted for her, and she laughed.

"tell Hannibal I'm ok."

"Hannibal?" She seemed confused. "Alright, I will."

The call was cut short when a nurse came to collect Crawford. His five minutes were up.

"I have to go back to Washington, Will. I'll get back down here next weekend, if I can. You gonna be okay?"

Will drew a question mark, then scratched it out and wrote, "sure."

The nurse shot up his intravenous line with Demerol and the clock went fuzzy. He couldn't keep up with the second hand. He drifted between memory and dream, and it wasn't so bad. It was a long memory-dream of the time he stayed with Peter's family for Christmas, interrupted by lights shown in his face, wooden sticks scraped under his fingernails, and the cold press of a speculum between his legs…

In the memory-dream of Christmas, Peter's face melted and turned into Hannibal's. They played carols on the harpsichord, ate panforte, and decorated the tree while a yule log burned. It all seemed so impossible now.

The fireplace became a single point source of light, and Hannibal was speaking to him softly. "Feel the heaviness in your limbs. Imagine yourself in a safe and relaxing place. Safe to relax completely. No matter how deeply you go, my voice will go with you…"

Hannibal drew near. The strings on the harpsichord snapped, the light went out, and the tree dug its roots into the floor, growing, filling the entire study with its branches. His touch was cold on Will's face, and their lips met as a black ocean wave crashing into the winter shore.

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Waking up in the drawing room to the dying embers of the fireplace and an address scrawled in Will's clumsy handwriting, Hannibal had never felt like such a fool.

His first thought was that Bedelia had been right, and Will had been playing him the entire time. His second thought was more of a stabbing pain at the realization that he was hopelessly, irrevocably in love with a man who did not return his feelings. It was the closest to panic that Hannibal had ever come, knowing that he could never kill Will, that he was completely at Will's mercy. He could follow Will to that address and try to retrieve him, but Will could melt his resolve with one look. Whatever Will envisioned for him, whether it be exile or incarceration, Hannibal would comply. His weakness angered him even more than Will's betrayal.

He turned over the note. His chest throbbed when he saw faint bloody fingerprints on the other side. Will had stopped to check on Hannibal's head wound. That, along with the lingering taste of Will's come in his mouth, gave him a sliver of hope.

Ordering a taxi so late at night and in such a rural area was challenging. Hannibal debated if it would be faster to hike through several miles of woods and farmland to steal a neighbor's car but thought better of it. It was the early hours of the morning when he finally reached the nearest international airport and several hours more before the next flight to St. Louis departed. He drove a rental car from the airport to the address, which turned out to be a nursing home.

Hannibal suspected that this was the dragon's lair. After all, St. Louis was where Will had told him he'd discovered a lead on the dragon when he'd lied about the FBI's plans. Even in his lies, Will always told a kernel of truth. But Hannibal didn't know what to expect when he arrived. He thought he would find flashing red and blue lights, the dragon in handcuffs, and possibly catch one last glimpse of Will before being stuffed in the back of a police car

himself. But the only vehicles in the driveway were a white van and his Bentley, still tinking as the engine cooled.

The thought of Will alone with the dragon was eerie.

He parked the rental car well away from the mansion and crept up to it silently, using trees and hedges to keep out of sight of the windows. The front door had a Victorian-era pin and tumbler lock that was simple enough to pick. He slid off his shoes and entered the foyer. Flashing lights led him down the hall to a parlor.

It was as though he had passed through the looking glass into Wonderland. Will sat companionably next to the dragon on a couch, watching as the dragon mauled a woman on a movie screen. Hannibal could only see the back of Will's head, but he seemed calm. Interested, even. When the film was over, the dragon offered to bring him along for his next hunt, and Will agreed.

Hannibal watched what happened next with surreal detachment. That couldn't be Will underneath the dragon, allowing him to do whatever he pleased. Those couldn't be Will's stifled cries of pain. That couldn't be Will *asking the dragon to bite him when he had prevented Hannibal from doing just that*—until Hannibal met Will's anguished gaze over the dragon's shoulder and the reality of the situation sank in.

There was no world in which he could allow this to continue. He moved forward to execute the beast.

Faster than Hannibal could move, the dragon fired his gun and kicked Will aside. Hannibal lunged with his linoleum knife but was thrown back. Relief when he saw Will on his feet again, until the dragon stabbed him in the face and lifted him in the air. Hannibal gutted him and quickly turned to Will, thinking the knife wound was the worst of his injuries—easy enough to fix.

With horror, Hannibal saw the bullet hole. No, this couldn't be happening, not this far from his supplies. It would take too long to gather the tools and medication he'd need to operate on Will himself.

When Will told him his plan, Hannibal realized that he'd never intended Hannibal to be caught. Why had he gone to the dragon alone then? Was it a lack of trust? They could've snuck up on him together and planted whatever evidence was necessary after murdering him, taking all the time in the world and avoiding this disaster entirely. Hannibal was furious that Will had robbed them of such a glorious pack kill.

Then he realized that Will had risked his life to dispatch the dragon as quickly as possible for the sake of some nameless family, whichever one the dragon had planned to change next. A manifestation of Will's self-righteous selfless *selfishness* that Hannibal had worked so hard to stamp out. He could've killed Will right then and there, as he lay huddled against the wall, clutching his stomach.

But Hannibal did as Will commanded: left him moaning pitifully on the floor to tow the rental car back to the airport, hiding the bloodstains on his clothes from the customer service

agents as best he could. He drove the dragon's van back to the nursing home and doused the furniture in gasoline as Will mumbled the address to the 911 operator.

After throwing a match into the parlor, he took one last look at Will's dying face. It wasn't too late to go back to the way things were. He could bring Will to a hospital in the next state over, make up new names for both of them, and take Will home as soon as he was stable. But the thought of returning Will to that small white room, strapping his limbs back into his restraints, and starting all over again was too painful to bear.

"Go," Will bade him, so Hannibal left.

Numb, he drove twelve hours back to Baltimore, stopping only once for gas. He kept glancing at the dashboard clock, trying to guess what was happening to Will at any given moment. 10:00. Had he been admitted to the operating room? 12:00. Had he been taken to a reputable trauma center or some backwoods family clinic? 2:00. How competent were the surgeons in St. Louis?

It was nine o'clock when the Bentley purred to a stop in his Fell's Point garage. He left Will's clothes and empty cans of Chef Boyardee in the backseat. He took a shower, scrubbing just enough to get the sweat off. Under the spray, Will's blood leached from the lines of his palms. He wondered if that would be the last he ever saw of him.

He combed his hair, dressed in his blandest beige suit, and packed a suitcase with enough clothes and cooking supplies to last a week. Then he sat by the phone in the study.

He waited for what felt like hours. He tried to occupy himself with a book or the harpsichord without success. The air was intensely Will Graham. Not the cheap shampoo or the fevered sweetness. Will himself. Clean, and rich in textures. Cotton sun-dried and ironed. Will Graham. Engaging and toothsome. Tedious in his altruism and absurd in his principles.

Hannibal sat back, his eyes closed, breathing, his eyebrows raised, as though he were listening to a concert.

Surely, Will was out of surgery by now. Were they keeping him sedated? Hannibal didn't consider the worst possibility—couldn't fathom it. Had Will died, he would know. By some miracle of quantum mechanics, the atomic vibration of his death would've reverberated through the study. No, he must still be alive.

When the silence became unbearable, Hannibal retreated to the Peabody Library of his memory palace, where Will poured over a pile of articles under the starry ceiling. He smiled as Hannibal joined him across the table but didn't speak. Hannibal's inner world had intense colors and smells, but not much sound. He could never make his ghosts say anything they hadn't said before.

The soft lamplight made a halo of Will's curls. Hannibal peeked at what Will was reading: a manual of insect classification. He reached over to remove Will's glasses to better see his eyes. They were dark and questioning.

"I don't know how to forgive you," he mused.

Will gave him a sympathetic look but didn't offer a solution.

In the study, the phone rang. Hannibal answered it instantly, anticipating the voice he wanted to hear most.

"Good evening. Hannibal Lecter speaking."

"They found Will." Alana's voice was like a slap in the face.

"That's wonderful news. Is he okay?"

"He called me from the hospital. Well, he had someone else call me, since he can't talk. The Ripper stabbed him in the face. He was shot, but I think they patched him up. He told me to tell you he's alright."

Will had called Alana instead of him.

"Where is he?" Once he had the address, he could be off.

"In Missouri if you can believe it. I'm going to fly out and see him as soon as I can."

"Please, what hospital is he staying at?"

Alana was puzzled. "You two really hit it off, didn't you? Are you planning to visit him as well?"

"Yes."

"Want to book our flights together? I have a meeting tomorrow morning, but I can make it to the airport by noon."

"Thank you, Alana, but I'd rather arrange my itinerary separately."

"...Alright."

She related the name of the hospital and Hannibal was relieved to recognize it as one of the best in the country. He located it on the road map Will had left in the car as Alana continued speaking, then thanked her again and said goodbye. He paused at a mirror to straighten his tie, then took a cab to the airport. He arrived at the hospital in St. Louis at four o'clock in the morning. The ICU receptionist tried to tell him that visiting hours began at seven o'clock, but after Hannibal probed into the details of their overnight guest policy, she relented. Will had a private room at the end of the ward. Hannibal stood outside the door for a moment to gather himself, then went inside.

Will's familiar scent coalesced before Hannibal could make out his form in the darkness. There was no anxiety or infection, only the chemical smells of antiseptic and medication.

Lit by the streetlamp through the window, Will was sound asleep. Bruised, bandaged, and back on an IV, just as Hannibal had pictured. He looked much smaller than he remembered.

While Will had fit perfectly in his room in Fell's Point, he seemed overshadowed by the cluttered machinery and tubing here.

Hannibal read the notes hanging from the end of Will's bed: laparotomy, staple closure of bowel, and ligatures on several large vessels. No complications during surgery. His medications seemed fine. Antibiotics, an antifibrinolytic agent, and Demerol for pain. He went to check on the IV when he spotted a notepad under Will's hand.

Hannibal eased the notepad out. Will had told someone about Dolarhyde's body, presumably a member of law enforcement. No wonder he hadn't contacted Hannibal directly. It would look odd to call a recent acquaintance before one's oldest friend. There was Alana's number. *I missed you*. Of course he missed her. Why wouldn't he? Hannibal wasn't jealous at all, nor did he consider abducting Will right then and there to prevent their reunion. *Ask Crawford address. Tell Hannibal I'm OK.* Such a short conversation. He studied his name written in Will's poor penmanship.

When he looked up, Will was awake. His expression was hard to read in the dim light, but he seemed almost wistful. He knocked his hand against Hannibal's and hooked a finger around it. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and grunted.

"Good morning, Will. Has the Demerol worn off?"

Will grimaced with the unbandaged side of his face. He let go of Hannibal to write on the notepad. His hand shook with pain. "don't be mad."

"After you abandoned me for your suicide mission? I think I deserve a bit of righteous anger." Hannibal found the patient-controlled analgesia pump and considered pressing the button. He watched Will struggle to write a single word.

"no."

"Why not?"

"after what you did." Will wouldn't look at him.

"What did I do?"

"I remember now. hypnosis."

So Will remembered their hypnotic age regression sessions. That didn't bother Hannibal, as nothing improper had happened during them.

"I was helping you deal with unresolved grief and survivor's guilt."

"you used Peter to get me to like you."

That made Hannibal pause. It was technically true.

Will was glaring now. "encephalitis, drugs, hypnosis. I don't know who I am anymore."

“I know who you are.”

“I was sick when you met me.” Will squeezed his eyes shut again, bracing himself against another wave of pain.

“And I made you better. I may have changed you, but no more than you have changed me.”

Hannibal pressed the button to administer more Demerol and watched as Will’s muscles unclenched. The anger fled from his eyes as they went hazy, just like they had when Hannibal sedated him after his escape attempt. So little had changed, it was as though they’d never left Fell’s Point.

Hannibal unwrapped the dressing on Will’s cheek to examine his sutures: a thick line of black crisscrosses, two inches long. The stitching wasn’t bad, but Hannibal could have done it better. With this amount of nerve damage, Will would never master a woodwind instrument, but with proper care his speech wouldn’t be impaired. He’d look handsome with the scar. He reapplied the bandage.

Will blinked at him placidly. He struggled to write for a different reason now. “I remember killing in Florence.”

Hannibal switched to Italian. “And I remember killing in New Orleans. Is that so wrong?”

Will began writing in Italian but scratched it out to continue in English. “stop it.”

Hannibal continued in Italian. “We’re conjoined. Neither of us would survive separation.”

“Lounds kids.”

Hannibal recalled their bodies as they had appeared on the dragon’s movie screen, arranged like dolls against the wall of the master bedroom.

“What happened to the Lounds family had to happen. I didn’t conceive of their murders, nor did I commit them. Responsibility is shared equally between me, you, and the dragon.”

“bastard.”

“They weren’t your family, Will. *I am your family*.”

“I’m not Mischa.”

“No, you aren’t. It was a mistake to think I could’ve ever given you up to her.” Hannibal caressed his uninjured cheek, stroking it with his thumb. Will leaned into the touch before he could stop himself, nose close to Hannibal’s wrist. His eyes were half-lidded. “We have a basic affinity for our family. We can detect each other from smell alone. What do you smell, Will?”

Will thought it over. “wish I could hate you.”

“Every family loves differently. Every love is unique.”

“don’t.”

“Don’t say that I love you?”

Will didn’t move. He didn’t look at Hannibal.

“Then I’ll wait.”

Hannibal moved his hand down to the bandage on Will’s neck. Will grabbed his wrist before he could unwrap it. They held that position for a few moments until Will relented with a heavy sigh. Hannibal uncovered the bite, almost identical to the one Will had left on the dragon’s neck. It was deep enough to contact muscle, but the doctors had left it unstitched, probably to see if it became infected before closure. Once any necrotic tissue had had a chance to develop, Hannibal would debride the wound and suture it himself. This was one scar that he couldn’t allow Will to keep.

“I know your pattern, Will. Like Judith, you use yourself as live bait. It worked on Hobbs, it worked on the dragon, and it worked on me. I count myself lucky that you didn’t decapitate me when you had the chance.”

“John’s body?”

“Hastily shoved into a freezer. You made sure I didn’t have time to clean up. If you wanted, you could call Agent Crawford and report me. But the coroner wouldn’t declare me the murderer, not when your fingerprints are on his head.”

Will’s pen hovered over the notepad. He seemed to have something complicated to express, too difficult to formulate through writing. He scribbled in frustration, then wrote, “Utter imbecile. Understand nothing.”

“Your impulse to kill the dragon was admirable. I’m not angry that you hurt yourself—I’m well aware of your self-destructive tendencies, and I don’t pretend that I could ever free you from them entirely. I only wish that you would apply that destruction in service of your own Becoming instead of the protection of faceless strangers.”

“for you.”

That confused Hannibal. “You knocked me out and ran off on your own for my sake?”

“Dragon would’ve been caught full moon.”

It took a moment for that to sink in. Will had thought that he’d been protecting Hannibal from the dragon. The notion was laughable and yet so delightful, he had to smile. Warmth suffused his chest.

He touched Will’s neck. “Was this necessary?”

“authenticity.”

Hannibal wanted to argue but let it go. “It would’ve been so much better had we gone together. Imagine it, Will. We could’ve caught him on his way to his van and tore him apart in the courtyard. He would’ve died watching the Red Dragon desert him to become one with you. Have you heard of the Norse blood eagle? I would’ve ripped his lungs out of the back of his ribcage to give him the wings he so desired.”

Will didn’t write a response, but his pupils dilated ever so slightly.

“Perhaps next time.” Hannibal allowed him to mull over their conversation while he replaced the bandage on his neck. Within minutes, Will fell back asleep. Making sure not to disturb him, Hannibal tore out the notebook page with their conversation. He folded it several times and tucked it into his breast pocket. After waiting an hour to see if Will would wake again, he left to book a hotel room and prepare their meals for the day.

A Kernel of Truth

Sunday, November 20th, 1983

Will woke up to find Hannibal slumped forward in the seat at his bedside. An insulated food carrying case and a pair of thermoses sat on the table next to him. Not counting when he knocked Hannibal out with the stag, this was the first time Will had ever seen him unconscious.

He knew Hannibal didn't require much sleep. During the weeks of Will's captivity, he'd consistently worked twelve-hour shifts at the hospital before spending upwards of eight hours with Will. Will had come to question if he needed rest at all. But here he was, jaw slack and shoulders relaxed. Two sleepless nights—including a head injury, two flights, a twelve-hour drive, arson, and a murder—well, two murders if John counted—seemed to be his limit.

Pieces of hair fell loose over Hannibal's forehead, and he wore an off-the-rack blazer that didn't match his ill-fitting pants. The only trace of his usual style was a silk tie hidden under his sweater. This was Hannibal at his most inconspicuous—a good strategy for a serial killer anticipating prolonged contact with law enforcement, and also for disarming Will, who was trying his best to be angry and failing miserably.

He forced himself to confront Hannibal's wrongdoings. Raspail, Dacre, and the Lounds family were all collateral damage of their game. Will understood now that Hannibal thought of them as gifts: art to admire, meat to nourish him, and the sweet revenge of Rob Lounds's death. From the start, Hannibal had preyed on Will's diseased empathy and loneliness to plant the seeds of death in his mind. He had known Will had encephalitis all along, had taken advantage of it, and, without a doubt, had intended to kill him. Will still couldn't pinpoint the moment Hannibal had changed his mind on that particular detail.

But even in the face of these facts, Will's lukewarm anger dissipated in moments, like trying to gather spilled liquid in his hands. Every crime of Hannibal's felt like one Will was guilty of. Not just John's or Dolarhyde's murders, but every murder stretching backward and forward in time. He even felt responsible for his own kidnapping. After all, toward the end, he'd had ample opportunity to escape. He just… hadn't cared to.

Though Will was starting to remember some of their hypnotic sessions, he knew he wasn't aware of the full extent of his programming. Perhaps he never would be. When he tried to remember events from that hazy time, all he saw was static and the steady rhythm of a metronome. He knew that should concern him, but he only felt bone-deep comfort—a primal mammalian response to being held in the complete warmth and safety of the womb. Hannibal's heartbeat against his back, gentle Italian in his ear, and always his heady scent. The type of human contact unfamiliar to Will except in memories of his mother that he wasn't even sure were real. If Will sank into that sense-memory for too long, he'd feel a stirring in his groin and need to force himself to think of something else, like cold fish guts or Freddy Lounds's face.

The way he felt about Hannibal went way beyond captor-captive bonding. Never mind that he was straight. A small part of him piped up to protest, *Hey, you've never even looked twice at a man before. This is weird!* He wanted to blame it on the hypnosis as well, but who was he kidding? He'd thought Hannibal was attractive from their very first meeting. Bleakly, he kicked himself for being more hung up about his sexuality than the cannibalism. All things considered, this should be the least of his worries.

Faced with Hannibal's vulnerable, sleeping form, Will grappled with his emotions. Even now, Will's instinct was to protect him. It burned like a hot coal in his chest, eating through the lining of his thoracic cavity, trying to get out. He'd been willing to die for Hannibal. Part of him wished he'd bled out on Dolarhyde's parlor floor before Hannibal had returned from the airport. Then he wouldn't feel this horrible ache, nor wonder what he'd become and how much of it was Hannibal's creation. Could something this deformed be love?

Hannibal seemed to think so. He'd thrown the word around so easily, murmuring it in his stupid Italian. *Amore*. If he could speak so lightly of love, Will decided, there was no way he was telling the truth.

Sure, Hannibal felt strongly about Will. Otherwise, he would've been discarded long ago. But it was a cold sort of possessiveness, like what a collector might feel about a limited-edition trinket. Will doubted if Hannibal could match the depth of whatever monster had lodged itself in his heart.

Even the indirect thought of Hannibal possibly loving him made him grimace in pain. Suddenly it was hard to breathe. The blips of his ECG stuttered.

Hannibal woke up immediately. He surveyed Will's contorted face and the patient monitor. "You know you can self-administer your pain medication with this button?"

Will gritted his teeth. He hated the way the Demerol made it hard to think. He was sick of mind-altering drugs, and in any case, he needed his wits about him to keep his story straight in the days to come. The last thing he wanted was to let slip accidentally that Hannibal had been his kidnapper and not Dolarhyde. But before Will could write this down, Hannibal pressed the button.

Whatever, Will thought, as relief flooded him. The hospital room faded away, leaving him alone with the red pinpoints in the center of Hannibal's pupils. He stared into them with no concept of time, lost in the array of microexpressions. The man looked pleased, and Will felt an answering giddiness. He just loved doping Will up, didn't he?

After a few minutes, Will wrote. "it makes me dumb."

Hannibal hummed in agreement. "I'll chase any visitors away if you aren't fit for conversation. In the meantime, we need to keep your abdominal muscles relaxed." He leaned over Will. For a moment, Will thought he was going to get a good morning kiss. He felt stupid when Hannibal only sniffed him. "Twenty-four hours with no sign of sepsis. That's excellent news." He busied himself with the containers of food, arranging bowls of quiche and cups of ginger tea for them both.

Will picked apart the quiche. Skinless tomatoes, potatoes, and shreds of white meat. Very simple by Hannibal's standards. It was difficult to open his mouth wide enough for a spoon, but when he managed to take a bite, he was pleasantly surprised.

"chicken?" he wrote.

"Lean meats are best for your digestive system in its current state," Hannibal explained. "You'll be on a low fiber diet for a while, I'm afraid."

It was delicious, but Will could only stomach so much before nausea stole his appetite. This didn't concern Hannibal, who in fact seemed to have expected it. He encouraged Will to sip more of his ginger tea.

The nurse came in every two hours to check on him. One time she caught Hannibal inspecting Will's bite mark and scolded him for unwrapping the sterile dressing. Hannibal apologized profusely and assured her he was a medical professional, but to no avail. She threatened to kick him out if she caught him fiddling with Will's bandages again. Will had to restrain himself from chuckling at Hannibal's feigned guilt. She stuck her head in the door more frequently after that, which made it difficult for them to conspire on the details of Will's supposed sojourn with the Dragon.

Hannibal kept his voice low and they conversed in a mixture of Latin and Italian. Page after page of Will's notebook was torn away and stashed in Hannibal's bag. They decided that Hannibal would visit the burnt nursing home at dusk to see how much of it remained, and therefore how easily Will could get away with lying about the particulars.

Will had a brief out of body experience where he was struck by the surreality of the situation. He was going to lie for Hannibal—for the Chesapeake Ripper. But it didn't feel that way. It felt like he would be lying for himself.

After lunch, Hannibal brought out *A Tale of Two Cities* and offered to read aloud from where Will had left off. Will appreciated it, as he had no way to hold the book without pulling on either his abdomen or neck. They read for hours, with Hannibal administering Demerol intermittently. He was in good spirits, Will noted, happy to be in control of Will's food, medication, and attention once more.

"*I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous, and happy, in that England which I will see no more*," Hannibal read. "*I see Her with a child upon her bosom, who bears my name. I see that I hold sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, for generations hence…*"

He was interrupted by a quiet knock on the door.

Alana came in, bundled up in a peacoat and earmuffs, cheeks pink from the weather, holding a pastry box tied with twine. She was wary at first, but brightened upon seeing Will awake and bounded toward his bedside.

"*Will*, I came as soon as I could. How are you feeling?"

Will desperately grasped at his pen and notepad. He had no idea how to convey how he felt. He'd thought he'd never see her again. He regretted not following her advice and was now resolved never to let their friendship fade. She was living proof that his life before Hannibal existed. It was a relief to see someone who saw the good in Will, now that he wasn't sure if he had any goodness left. In the end, he drew a sloppy smiley face, then dropped the pen to grab her hand.

"Will is doing well," Hannibal said. "No complications to his surgery and no developing infection. He was quite lucky with the GSW location. No major arteries hit and only minor perforation of the bowel."

Alana's relieved laugh set Will smiling on the uninjured side of his face.

"I don't know if they'll let you eat it, but I brought some pumpkin pie. It's just store-bought, but Thanksgiving is this week. I didn't want you to miss out on your favorite."

Will was incredibly touched that Alana remembered it after all these years. He squeezed her hand and looked to Hannibal.

"It should be fine," he said. His eyes flicked to where their hands were linked.

Alana glanced at the food containers on the table. "It looks like you've been eating, but do you want some now?"

Will had refused the rest of his chicken soup ten minutes ago, but he nodded eagerly. Hannibal passed out plates and forks while Alana sliced the pie.

Struggling to eat was more embarrassing in front of Alana than Hannibal. He'd seen Will at every conceivable low point already, after all. It felt natural for Hannibal to hand-feed him back when he was a captive, but Will wouldn't stand for that now. Consequently, he only managed three spoonfuls of the cold pie before giving up. Hannibal only took a few polite bites of his own portion—more than Will had expected from him, honestly. The two of them sat back to watch Alana eat her slice. Even something as innocuous as her chewing was something to treasure. Thankfully, she didn't seem perturbed.

"When did you arrive, Hannibal?" she asked.

"Early this morning." He neglected to say that his flight had departed at one am.

"Have you booked your return flight yet? Mine's at eight twenty."

"My program director has approved an emergency leave of absence. I'll be staying through next Sunday."

"Wow. That's very… chivalrous." Alana's eyebrows raised. "I'm glad I introduced you two. That was only in late September, wasn't it?" And Will had been kidnapped in early October.

"Yes."

"And you're okay with him staying, Will?" She was worried that Hannibal was imposing.

He wrote on the notepad, “I appreciate the company.”

“If you change your mind, don’t hesitate to say so. A week-long absence is pretty serious for a resident and I’m sure—”

“Please, Alana, it’s no trouble at all. I’m staying for my own peace of mind more than anything.”

An awkward silence as Alana looked between them. Will took another bite of pie.

“Hannibal, could I talk to you outside for a moment?”

They went into the hall, probably to discuss emotional boundaries. It was Will’s first time being alone in the hospital room while awake. He expected to feel more at ease by himself but was somehow more anxious. Irrationally, he worried that Alana would have Hannibal forcibly removed. His anxiety only abated when Hannibal came back into view. Alana looked bewildered but she didn’t bring up their relationship again.

She stayed for the rest of the afternoon and early evening. Will asked all about her progress in medical school and was finally able to congratulate her on her job offers. She gave Will a stack of newspapers and magazines from her bag, including the latest issues of *Field & Stream* and *Fly Tyer*. Will pretended to be excited, though Hannibal had provided him with both back at Fell’s Point.

Before leaving, Alana rested a hand on Hannibal’s shoulder and stooped to kiss him on the cheek. Hannibal tilted his head obligingly and smiled at her.

Fury exploded in Will’s chest, but he kept his face carefully composed in his half-smile.

“If it’s not too much trouble, Hannibal, could you give me a quick call every night before bed? I’d like updates. And Will, if you ever want to talk about what happened, I’ll always be there for you. I know it won’t be easy until your face heals, but I’ll visit again soon, okay?”

Will nodded, barely registering her words. And then she was gone.

He glared at his lap, spitting mad. He’d known Hannibal was still seeing Alana, but seeing the reality of it made him want to tear open the drywall and chew on the electrical wiring. His reaction made no sense. Will wasn’t thinking straight. The Demerol was starting to wear off. He snatched the analgesia button away before Hannibal had a chance to press it.

Hannibal leaned forward, smug face in hitting range.

“Tell me, Will, how did that make you feel?”

Will growled. He resisted the childish urge to punch the bed. Hannibal’s teeth were begging for his fist.

In Latin: “You seemed very pleased to see Alana. I can’t tell if this is jealousy or fear for her life.”

And there was the issue. As angry as Will was, he had to do what was best for Alana. She'd probably be better off dating someone who wasn't a serial killer, but by that logic she was better off not being friends with Will either. And, really, whether or not they were dating had little bearing on her safety. Who knew what Hannibal would do to her if they split up. If he couldn't be Alana's friend, he certainly wouldn't allow Will to be. Ultimately, it came down to what Alana wanted.

"you make her happy," he wrote.

"I don't care about her happiness. I care about yours. Why don't you use your words to tell me what you want?"

Now Hannibal was *babying* him.

"punch you."

"What else?"

"strangle you."

"Go on." Hannibal was practically purring.

He imagined swinging a right-hook at Hannibal's jaw. It would be so satisfying to wipe that smirk off his face, even if he tore a few stitches. He lifted his hand intending violence but ended up wiping the spot on Hannibal's cheek that Alana had kissed. Hannibal's expression softened. He turned his head to make it easier for Will to reach, eyes magnetic. They distracted Will long enough that he didn't notice Hannibal's hand sneaking toward the analgesia button. He pressed it before Will could stop him.

Will relaxed into his pillow like a puddle of soup, hallowed out, but still seething.

Hannibal looked pleased with himself. "To maintain appearances, it would be better for me to keep seeing Alana, but you have the power to change that with a word."

He was trying to make Will feel like he was in control. Will had fallen for that illusion during his captivity, but he knew better now. He'd never be in control again.

Frustrated, he scrawled, "I can still turn us both in."

Hannibal smiled. "Indeed, I'm completely at your mercy. Now, do you want to finish *A Tale of Two Cities*? We only have a few paragraphs left."

Will shook his head. He already knew the ending, and he didn't care to hear it.

Thursday, November 24th, 1983

The next few days might have been lifted from Hannibal's wildest dreams. He could scarcely believe how events had unfolded in his favor. Will let Hannibal take care of him just as

before. He preferred Hannibal's cooking to anything the hospital provided. When he needed help standing, washing, or changing, he turned to Hannibal instead of the nurses. He hid in his private bathroom so that Hannibal could discreetly stitch his bite wound and even took an active interest in evading the FBI, collaborating on the story he would tell during interviews. It was good fun, almost better than before, now that Hannibal didn't have to interrupt their time together with his shifts at Johns Hopkins.

Their privacy was frequently interrupted, however. Will was taken away for X-rays, ultrasounds, and a laparoscopy. A physical therapist visited once a day to exercise Will and counsel him on how to move during his recovery. A few intrepid journalists tried to sneak into the ward, and Hannibal relished viciously ousting them. Once, a psychiatrist attempted to assess Will's mental health and nearly got his head bitten off. Hannibal took the man aside to explain that Will was nowhere near ready to address the events of his abduction.

At first, Hannibal felt a pang of regret that he had to share Will's attention with others. Then he noticed the way Will shied away from everyone else, never looking them in the eyes, never prolonging an interaction. His social skills were no worse than before, but they provided a stark contrast from how relaxed he was around Hannibal. He told himself this wasn't surprising. Will was prejudiced against medical practitioners after all.

The real test had been Alana's visit. Will was more excited to see her than Hannibal had ever seen him. Bitterly, Hannibal prepared himself to accept that Will still had feelings for her, but then he noticed Will's avoidant behavior creeping in. Will looked at her nose, her mouth, her hair, or the wall behind her, but never met her eyes. He certainly didn't seem to miss her when she left.

When Will had told him he'd killed the dragon for Hannibal's sake, he suspected. After Will's reaction to the peck on his cheek, he was triumphantly certain: Hannibal's feelings were not unrequited.

Hannibal constantly bit his tongue on the subject. The urge to poke at it was powerful but wouldn't win him Will's favor when the man was so deep in denial. Clearly, he hadn't fully accepted his violent nature. Will denied his love for Hannibal out of fear of what it would mean about himself. The two breakthroughs would likely occur simultaneously and wouldn't be aided by direct application of pressure. Luckily, Hannibal was well-versed in the art of subtle persuasion.

In the meantime, Hannibal enjoyed planning their life together. Once Will was discharged, they would return to Fell's Point and assess Will's reaction to the location. If the associations were too painful, Hannibal would arrange more suitable accommodations. He wondered if Will would prefer an apartment near Washington Place or a proper house somewhere along the Gunpowder. He hoped Will would want to complete his PhD, or at least stay on land. He'd have to put his foot down if Will tried to run away to join a deep-sea fishing expedition.

Will's facial bandage was gone. A doctor had removed the sutures in his cheek and replaced them with butterfly stitches that morning. Hannibal monitored the process closely and reapplied some of them as soon as the doctor left. Will was beginning to explore a wider range of movement in his jaw. Eating was easier, but Hannibal still had him write in his notepad. Will was entering the proliferation phase of wound healing, where fibroblasts and

collagen networks formed around torn skin and muscle. It was important Will exercised his healing masseter but considering the unfortunate angle of the stab—perpendicular to the facial skin tension lines—Hannibal was extra cautious to limit hypertrophic scarring. With Hannibal's extra finger, they didn't need any more identifying marks between the two of them.

That afternoon, Hannibal placed his latest culinary creation on the side table: a pumpkin pie with braided crust edges and a smattering of candied cranberries, fresh out of his hotel room oven.

Will looked up from that morning's edition of the Tattler. "american cuisine?" he wrote.

"Oven-roasted pumpkin, fresh butter, and the proper balance of nutmeg and clove." In truth, it was Hannibal's first attempt at the recipe, and he didn't think it was his best work.

Will smiled with his eyes. It was the same levity he'd shown whenever Hannibal played Scott Joplin on the harpsichord, and Hannibal tried to take comfort in it. Will scooped a bite straight out of the tin. After savoring it for a moment, he wrote, "vanilla and orange zest?"

"Last minute additions to add interest to the filling."

"it's the best pie I've ever had."

Hannibal relaxed minutely. He hadn't realized he'd been tense and felt a stab of frustration at himself, a common occurrence these days. In so many ways, life would be simpler if he killed Will, but that was off the table. He was resolved to master Will's influence over him. If only he could figure out how.

While Will ate, Hannibal continued sketching his reimagination of Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes*—the original bronze located in the Sala dei Gigli. Holofernes sat vanquished before Judith, hand pinned to the floor by her foot. She raised her scimitar over her shoulder, staring boldly at the viewer as if demanding they bear witness to his execution. Hannibal remembered John explaining the significance of the statue in Florentine history to Will over their tripe stew. Now, Hannibal sketched Will's face from the moment their eyes had met over Dolarhyde's kneeling form: brow furrowed, blood spattered, pocketknife still lodged in his cheek.

The scratching of Will's pen drew his attention.

"Tattler article about Dolarhyde."

Hannibal had read it that morning while Will slept. The FBI had given a brief press release saying that the deceased Francis Dolarhyde was 'suspected to be the Chesapeake Ripper,' and the Tattler had run with it. RIPPER TOASTED! VICTIM FOUND WOUNDED OUTSIDE BURNING BUILDING. The article described Dolarhyde's past and speculated on what horrors Will had experienced as his captive. Though the press had set up camp outside the hospital, no journalist had managed to muscle their way into Will's room—not with Hannibal standing guard around the clock. Without access to Will himself, they took fodder from their October interview with him. As a result, many of their conjectures came unfortunately close

to the truth. “Bride of Frankenstein,” they called him. The article was accompanied by a photo of Agent Crawford exiting the hospital. Refreshingly, the name Lounds did not appear on the byline.

They switched to Latin.

“It seems the FBI are no longer convinced that the dragon and the Ripper are the same killer,” Hannibal said.

“not good.”

“How so?”

“need Lounds out of protective custody.”

A shiver of anticipation went down Hannibal’s spine. “Whyever would you need that, Will?”

Will gave him an unimpressed look, then a knock came from the door. Hannibal’s sketch, the Tattler, and the latest page in Will’s notebook all disappeared into Hannibal’s bag.

Crawford peered in. “Will, Dr. Lecter. Is this a good time?”

An electric charge ignited between them, imperceptible from the outside, but palpable to them. It wasn’t nervous energy, but a thrill of connection as they donned their masks together, Hannibal’s well-worn, Will’s newly crafted. How exciting to have Will join him on this side of the veil of his own volition.

“Come in, and, please, call me Hannibal.” He rose to shake Crawford’s hand, allowing him to take the only chair. Hannibal sat on the edge of Will’s bed so that he could still see the notepad. “I understand we have you to thank for Will’s private room.”

“The Bureau tries its best to protect the privacy of key witnesses. I had hoped this could wait until you were out of the hospital, but would you mind answering a few questions for me, Will?”

“sure. want some pie?” Will had already half-demolished it.

“Looks delicious, but I’m good.” Crawford eyed Hannibal. “We’ll be covering some sensitive topics. Perhaps it would be better if we spoke alone.”

“Hannibal stays.”

“Alright then. Let’s start with broad strokes. Can you tell me everything you remember, starting from the moment Dolarhyde approached you on October 8th?”

Will’s story came slowly, limited by the speed of his hand. He wove the tale he and Hannibal had agreed upon. He was ambushed in Chilton’s backyard, tied up in the back of a van for a long drive, marched blindfolded into a house, and spent weeks restrained in a bedroom. He almost escaped at one point, earning him the scar on his thigh. After that, there was a lot Will didn’t remember, but he gradually earned Dolarhyde’s trust. Finally, Dolarhyde tried to

commit murder-suicide and burn the mansion down, but Will managed to get ahold of a pocketknife and kill Dolarhyde first.

“Did he discuss his murders with you at any point?” Crawford asked.

“he filmed himself killing his victims. had me watch the one about the Lounds family.”

“None of the other victims? Just the Loundses?”

“just the Loundses. he killed them for me. he wanted me to appreciate it.”

“Did he ever mention Benjamin Raspail or Dennis Dacre?”

“not sure. can’t remember.”

“Did he ever talk about the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“can’t remember.”

Crawford took some notes, then changed tack. “How would you describe your mental state prior to your abduction?”

Will paused. They hadn’t anticipated this line of questioning. “not great. disturbed. wanted to quit. when the Ripper left that letter for me, I went off the deep end. the things I said—I’m sorry, Jack.”

Crawford brushed off the apology. “Water under the bridge. Do you have a history of drug abuse?”

“no.”

“Did you experience memory loss prior to October 8th?”

Will hesitated again. “yes. stretches of up to five hours. chalked it up to stress.”

“Did you come into contact with Dolarhyde prior to October 8th?”

Hannibal had informed Will that his first meeting with Dolarhyde—the bite incident—had been on September 30th. Will’s bite mark should have burned away in the fire. They had met again on October 1st and 3rd, in public both times. Crawford knew something. Did a witness come forward?

“no,” Will lied.

Crawford leaned back in the chair, pensive. “Our team finished combing through the remains of Dolarhyde’s house yesterday. They found a pair of dentures that matched the bite marks on Mrs. Sherman, Mrs. Lounds, and Mrs. Jacobi. The dentures Dolarhyde was wearing at time of death match the bite mark on your neck. The DNA from his corpse matches the DNA found on all his victims. Thank you for submitting the sexual assault kit, by the way.”

Will nodded.

“Do you remember losing a chunk of hair at some point during late September or early October? It would've been painful. Took some skin out with the follicles.”

Will shook his head, looking appropriately concerned. Hannibal immediately thought of Will’s struggle with Dolarhyde on September 30th. He might have yanked some of Will’s hair out then.

“Drug testing has gotten pretty advanced in recent years. We performed a sectional analysis of your SAFE kit hair samples and found quite a drug history. Could you elaborate on that?”

There it was—the factor that Hannibal hadn’t anticipated. Will had to navigate this subterfuge, while Hannibal stood ready to take Crawford out if he failed. Hannibal admired Will’s composure. He wore just the right amount of confusion on his face.

“he injected me with things. I don’t know what. I don’t remember much from those times.”

“We found extended periods of heavy Rohypnol, Valium, morphine, amobarbital, and scopolamine use. He knew what he was doing as well. Tapered your doses to prevent withdrawal. You were drug-free for at least a week at the time of his death. Probably helped you escape. Do you know why he might have given you this combination of drugs?”

The question was designed to be cruel. Crawford was hiding his motive behind it.

“to keep me docile.”

“Do you know why he stopped?”

“no.”

“Did he ever try to convince you to… join his team, so to speak?”

Will blinked. “he wanted me to be his friend, so I convinced him that I was. that’s how I survived.”

Crawford heaved a sigh.

“Will, I’m going to be frank—you deserve it, after everything you’ve been through. We found your hair at the Jacobi crime scene, torn out at the root, in the bed, mostly on Mrs. Jacobi. A few agents were quick to jump to conclusions, but we cross-referenced your latest hair sample with the one from the scene. The hair at the Jacobi house was pulled out in late September or early October, prior to your abduction. It contained no traces of amobarbital or scopolamine, but it did test positive for Rohypnol. We think it’s possible that Dolarhyde or an accomplice, if he had one, drugged you repeatedly around the time of the Sherman murders.”

“accomplice? the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“Possibly. We found a fireproof safe in the nursing home rubble that contained a scrapbook of sorts. Dolarhyde collected newspaper clippings of all the Ripper’s kills from the last ten

years, including the coverage of your disappearance. The articles about the families were accompanied by locks of hair from Mrs. Sherman, Lounds, and Jacobi, but there weren't any trophies from the other Ripper victims. As it stands, the only evidence that Dolarhyde was the Ripper was Mrs. Sherman's tongue in your typewriter. Considering that Dolarhyde doesn't match the Ripper's profile and the fact that you don't remember meeting him before October 8th, it's looking less likely that they were the same guy."

When Will started writing, Crawford held up his hand. "I know what you're going to say: 'I told you so.' Well, we can't be sure either way. What we do know is that someone roofied you several times before your abduction. Do you have any idea who that might've been? It could've been someone close to you, perhaps a recent acquaintance."

Will considered the question for a long time. He nervously ran his fingers through his hair. He didn't look at Hannibal.

Hannibal began calculating the best way to kill Crawford and smuggle Will out of the hospital undetected. He'd have to crush his windpipe before he had the chance to yell, then hide his body in the bathroom. They had an hour until a nurse came to check on Will, giving them plenty of time to unplug his patient monitor so it wouldn't cause an alarm, change Will's clothes, and sneak out. They'd drive Hannibal's rental to the airport parking garage. There, they would catch a couple of travelers in a deserted aisle of long-term parking. A fresh vehicle, identity, and credit card would mark the beginning of their life on the lam. Hannibal wondered if the police would believe they were fool enough to fly from the airport.

Finally, Will wrote, "can this stay off record?" His face was beet red.

"Sure."

"I went to a park at night a couple times to blow off steam. it could've been a few different people, but I don't know their names or faces. honestly, it could've been Dolarhyde."

Crawford took that in. "And the hair…?"

"he could've gotten it then. it was stupid. I never did it before, and I learned my lesson. I'll never do it again."

It was exhilarating to watch Will lie so blatantly. The humiliation on his face was entirely real—the kernel of truth that made his deception convincing. Hannibal made sure to show a hint of shock and betrayal, letting Crawford read into that what he would.

Crawford looked between Hannibal and Will and seemed to have a revelation regarding their relationship. He cleared his throat. "Well then. Which park was this?"

Will groaned. "even if the same people came back, they wouldn't recognize me."

"Will," Crawford snapped.

"druid hill."

“Alright.” He stood up, not looking at either of them. “Thank you for telling me. That’ll be all for now, but I’ll stay in touch.” He nodded at Hannibal. “Dr. Lecter.”

“Detective.”

“happy thanksgiving,” Will wrote.

Crawford grimaced. “Happy Thanksgiving.” He left.

Will collapsed, mortified, probably mourning the loss of his reputation as a bonafide heterosexual. Hannibal returned to the chair and resumed his sketching, allowing Will to suffer in silence.

After several minutes, Will wrote, “that went horribly.”

“It went rather well, all things considered. I’m proud of you.”

“sodium amytal? scopolamine? really?”

Hannibal didn’t know what Will had expected. How else did he think Hannibal had induced false memories of their past together?

“any other drugs I should know about?” Will wrote.

“Just a little psilocybin.” Mushrooms were benign compared to everything else.

Will scowled. “they think I might be the Ripper.”

Many lines of evidence were pointing in that direction. Will’s questionable mental state prior to October 8th, Mrs. Sherman’s tongue in his typewriter, and now his connection with Dolarhyde. The Ripper murders had even ceased after Will’s abduction. He had succeeded in shifting attention away from Hannibal, but in doing so had brought more scrutiny upon himself.

“That’s simple enough to rectify.”

Will started writing something, then crossed it out. “do I want to know?”

“We have a few options, depending on what you’d like to do after you’re discharged from the hospital. For example, do you wish to complete your doctorate?”

“maybe. not necessarily with Chilton.”

“Excellent. And how badly do you want to kill Freddy Lounds?”

Will’s gaze was scorching, but he didn’t write anything. Hannibal’s pulse quickened.

“In that case, I know just the thing.”

The Awakening

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, December 10th, 1983

The days plodded by with nerve-wracking tedium. Will's recovery was so incremental, it felt like he'd never be free of the hospital. Each time he asked if he could be discharged, the doctors shook their heads, citing concerns about bowel tears and fistula formation. Will didn't understand most of the medical jargon and he didn't care to learn it. He deferred to Hannibal's judgment, happy to think about the holes in his traitorous abdomen as little as possible. He came to think of his hospital stay as a kind of confinement, like he'd swapped one captor for a set of new ones.

The first time Hannibal flew back to Baltimore, Will didn't know what to do with himself. It was pathetic to admit, but he had come to rely on the reassurance of Hannibal's confident aura. Not only did he have preternatural knowledge of what to do in any given situation, he delighted in their ruse. Favored by both Apollo and Dionysus, Hannibal sinned without fear of consequence or divine retribution. He pursued the ecstatic and terrifying via unplanned impulse—a headlong waltz between the self and the cosmic, suspended like a soap bubble over brimstone.

Will was not born under the same lucky star. Left to deal with doctors and police on his own, he was on the verge of crumbling. He expected Crawford to return with damning evidence and ship him off to the BSHCI at any moment. Maybe they'd put him in the cell across from Hobbs. Will's craving to smoke was so bad, he tried to sneak out of the ward. The nurses caught him and strongly advised him against it for minutes on end before he returned to his room, tail between his legs.

Based on his ominous words, Will expected a Ripper tableau to appear in the news as soon as Hannibal arrived back in Baltimore, but weeks passed with no new murders. He didn't know if he should be relieved or disappointed. On the one hand, he didn't want Hannibal to draw more attention to himself. It was honestly incredible that Crawford hadn't investigated him more thoroughly yet. On the other hand, Will suspected that Hannibal was waiting for him to return so that he could *participate* in his plans, and that thought was terrifying.

Unable to focus on reading, he spent most of his time in his "memory palace," as Hannibal called it. Will didn't think it resembled much of a palace, since it had so few walls. It was mostly a patchwork of his favorite rivers, from the Mississippi to the Arno. He cast flies for hours, never catching anything, just feeling the line in his hand and the rush of water around his legs. The only buildings were his little house in Louisiana and an empty Peabody Library.

He'd described his hallucinations of Peter's ghost to Hannibal, who had recognized them as an imago: an image of a loved one buried in the unconscious, carried with us our entire lives. Will shared his dismal mealtimes with Peter's imago on the back porch of his Louisiana

shack, taking in the summertime wildlife. Woodpeckers and squirrels at lunch, crickets and bullfrogs at dinner. Their conversations were simple and comforting.

He didn't approach the Peabody Library as often, intimidated by what lurked within. Of course, Hannibal was ever present at their table under the stars, but beyond him was a gateway leading to darker halls over which Will had no control. Hannibal could traverse those twisted passages freely—had retrieved Peter from those hellish depths—but Will couldn't follow him there. When he needed Hannibal's calming presence, they would converse under the constellations Draco and Hercules, Will glancing nervously at the looming mouth that threatened to swallow them both.

Time stretched and snapped until suddenly Hannibal returned, and the doctors declared Will fit to leave. He changed out of his hospital gown and into the street clothes Hannibal had brought, and they were on their way.

The outside world was jarring at first. It was Will's first taste of freedom since the delirious night of Dolarhyde's death. He even had a little money—Crawford had dropped off his wallet and keys. Will could do whatever he wanted, and Hannibal wouldn't stop him.

Standing outside the hospital entrance, the first thing he chose to do was get into a taxi with Hannibal. Then he chose to follow Hannibal into an airport. He watched Hannibal purchase two tickets to Baltimore and followed him through a metal detector. They sat in a terminal. Will had expected to be overwhelmed by the bustle of the crowd, but he found it easy to ignore the faces around him.

"This feels like a dream," he said, watching a young couple play make-believe with their daughter across the aisle.

"Dreams prepare us for waking life." Hannibal looked up from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* to follow Will's gaze. He regarded the family. "Have you ever thought about becoming a father?"

Will raised his eyebrows and carefully considered his response. He'd once dreamt of having kids. Raising a child would connect him to simpler times, like an anchor streaming behind him in heavy weather. But that wasn't feasible now. He didn't trust himself with a child—not after Hobbs and Dolarhyde. The very concept of family frightened him. But telling Hannibal this wouldn't lead to anything good.

"I've always wanted a dog."

"Do you ever wonder about Peter's daughter? Hannah would be a little over two years old now."

"Not for a long time." In the hallucinatory week following Peter's death, Will had imagined acting as her uncle, supporting her and Beatrice. Of course, Will hadn't been qualified to support anyone soon thereafter. "She has plenty of family already. I know she's fine."

Hannibal's gaze lingered on the girl before returning to his book. "You know, I doubt if our dragon bothered to read any of Blake's work. I myself never gave much credence to English

poets—"

"You quoted *Hamlet* in your letter to me, suggesting I kill myself. 'Slings and arrows' and all that."

Hannibal looked surprised. Will rarely mentioned the particulars of his tableaus. "A metaphorical suicide, Will. At the time, I didn't realize how literally you would take me. In any case, Blake hardly bears comparison to Shakespeare. He was always too nursery school for my taste, but I'm starting to see the appeal."

Will leaned closer to read a few stanzas over Hannibal's shoulder:

Tyger, Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

"From the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Blake had a deceptively sophisticated understanding of the duality of the human soul. He believed that the Fall of Man and the creation of the physical world were the same event, and that all people contain a twofold identity of good and evil."

"Tyger and Lamb. Typhoid and swans. It all comes from the same place."

"A pity you didn't have a chance to look into Blake's work before we began your treatment."

Acid crept into Will's tone. "I was too busy uncovering Dolarhyde's identity." He knew Hannibal thought his dogged pursuit of justice was a pity too. Aesthetics over ethics, always.

Hannibal sighed. He flipped through some pages until he reached a poem about a sunflower. "Look here, as well: Clytie rooted to the spot, condemned to follow the progress of Helios, her beloved, across the sky forevermore. Blake had an Ovidian understanding of frustrated love."

"And of frustrated revenge. Wrath is a poison tree that uncontrollably grows to its inevitable conclusion."

"Only when it is not expressed honestly. 'I was angry with my friend; I told my wrath, my wrath did end.' Blake does not prefer innocence or experience. Passage from one state to the

other is the natural progression of life. Without the simultaneous existence of both, human existence would cease."

"He was a Romantic."

"Aren't we all?" Hannibal ran his finger down the short poem. "I believe I've only lately passed from innocence to experience—something I could never have predicted, all those weeks ago."

"Have you forgiven me, then?" Will knew Hannibal was not being honest about his own wrath.

"You aren't yet strong enough to bear my forgiveness."

Will mulled that over on the flight to Baltimore.

In the airport parking garage, Will combed Hannibal's Bentley for evidence. The trunk was empty and did not smell like gasoline. His soup cans and come-stained pants were gone from the backseat. He popped the glove compartment to check for the steak knife and found the road map of Missouri. He was shocked for a second. Unfolding it, he recognized his own sweaty fingerprints smudged over St. Charles. The address of Will's hospital was written in the corner in Hannibal's elegant cursive.

"You should've gotten rid of this."

"I should've," Hannibal agreed.

Will returned the map to the glove compartment.

At Fell's Point, Will got out of the car on the sidewalk, leaving Hannibal to park the Bentley in the garage alone. The window on the fourth floor was still boarded up—a facade impenetrable to both Will's screams and Crawford's suspicions. A version of himself was still trapped in the white room beyond it.

He unlocked the front door with the key he'd forgotten to return in October. Everything was just as he recalled, except now the curtains were open. Hannibal was already assembling dinner ingredients in the kitchen. He glanced at Will with an unreadable expression, then continued chopping. Will went upstairs.

Afternoon light filled the study. Will tested the balcony door: unlocked. A silver letter opener sat on the desk. Had that always been there? He pulled the leather-bound *Corpus Hippocraticum* from the shelf and turned to the chapter on ethics. The Hippocratic Oath in its original Latin, specifically the "do no harm" part, was excised to make room for the torture chamber key. He scowled, imagining Hannibal congratulating himself on the irony.

Will plucked the key from the pages and unlocked the white room.

Empty of the hospital bed and patient monitor, his cell was smaller than he remembered. Or maybe Will had become larger. The plasmapheresis machine was against the far wall, covered in a sheet. Will was struck by the sickening buzz of overhead lights and the drone of

the chest freezer, both of which had faded into white noise during his weeks of captivity. The freezer didn't contain John's body or any severed heads. It was barren except for a single sample tube containing 10 mL of clear liquid labeled "CSF 10/08/83 L. Wyman."

Will shut off the light, closed the door, and locked it. He had the sudden urge to take a shower, so he took one in the bathroom adjoining his old room—the one he'd stayed in after Hannibal had flooded Chilton's basement. He flinched when he saw himself in the mirror: the angry red slash on his cheek. It marked him as a changed man, plain for all to see.

Suds running down the laparotomy and gunshot scars on his stomach, Will confronted the fact of the matter: he had never lived here of his own free will. Not a speck of this house was untainted by manipulation. It crawled over the walls and seeped into his skin. Even now, his programmed dependency on Hannibal itched and stung like a leech. He rinsed and dried himself, but he didn't feel clean.

There were no clothes in his old bedroom, so he crossed the hallway to Hannibal's. He wasn't prepared for the smell that barreled into him at Mach Five as soon as he opened the door, hitting his hindbrain and dissolving the tension in his muscles before he was even conscious of it. The towel fell from his waist. The urge to crawl into the bed was powerful. His glasses were on the nightstand, but he didn't bother with them. He rooted through the mix of his clothes and Hannibal's in the dresser and put on a white t-shirt and jeans.

An olive-green fisherman's sweater with a shawl neck was folded neatly in the bottom drawer. The floor tilted under Will's feet as he knelt to pick it up. It unfurled; cable knit wool well-worn into fluid softness. When he lifted it to his nose, he groaned.

Waking. Waking calm. Waking in a pleasant room.

The echoes of faint chamber music. A rose garden at the center of a hurricane.

Heat spread over his scalp and down the back of his neck, prickles of electric charge sizzling over his shoulders and down his spine. He shoved his face into the knit and groaned again. Touching himself, he found he was hard.

Furious, he ran downstairs. When Hannibal looked up from the cutting board, wondrous piety bloomed over his face. He put down his knife.

"What the hell is this?" Will threw the sweater at Hannibal's feet.

Hannibal looked at the sweater, then up at Will. He opened his mouth as if to speak but didn't say anything.

"You left it there on purpose. You were curious what I would do."

Hannibal didn't deny it. He squared his shoulders, arms loose at his sides.

Will stalked toward him until they were inches apart.

"I'll never be free of you, will I? Always the rat trapped in your maze. Always the dog salivating at your bell. Do you regret any of it? Even a little?"

One look into Hannibal's eyes told him the truth. There was no guilt there, only excitement.

Will grabbed him by the shoulders and slammed him against the fridge. Hannibal went easily. His lack of resistance only further enraged Will. He kneed Hannibal in the abdomen once, twice, three times, then shoved him to the floor. He stomped his heel into Hannibal's gut, pulling a grunt from him at last. Falling on him, Will punched him in the mouth again and again and again.

"This—is what—you wanted," Will snarled.

Hannibal's face whipped to the side with each hit, spraying blood across the tile floor. He bared his scarlet teeth—in a smile or a snarl, Will couldn't tell.

"Self—satisfied—fucking—prick."

Will jerked him upright by the collar. Hannibal was dazed, his lips bright red, dripping blood. His eyelids fluttered as he looked up at Will, and his gaze held a tenderness Will had never seen before. The sight caused something to misfire in his brain. He shuddered.

"You like that?"

Hannibal's gaze flicked down to Will's groin. He wanted it.

Before Will knew it, he'd dragged Hannibal to his knees and shoved his cock down his throat. Hannibal reached up to grab the waistband of his jeans, tugging him closer. Will mussed his hair in his desperation to direct their pace. He ended up holding the back of his head and fucking it. Hannibal's tongue was hot and wet. Blood foamed around the edges of his lips. His eyes watered as he struggled to breathe, but still he held eye contact, devastating Will with his submission.

Surrendering to their inevitability came with wretched relief. They slid into place, like this was where they'd always been. The history of his touch burned Will's skin—from their aborted handshake in Heimlich's study to the glide of his scalpel in his thigh. Will didn't think. He didn't fight the oily tendrils of Hannibal's influence tightening in his neural anatomy. He did what he was built to do, snapping his hips, noting briefly that Hannibal was as close to coming undone as he was.

"Touch yourself," he commanded.

Hannibal didn't bother unzipping his trousers. He pressed his palm against his dick through his apron and whined. His throat tightened as he came.

Will's peripheral vision fuzzed out as his whole body tensed. With one last thrust, he released himself in the back of Hannibal's throat, grip tight in his hair. He shuddered, sensitive to the contractions of his swallows.

It was several moments before Will returned to himself. Then he pushed Hannibal off him and turned away, zipping himself back up. His shirt was speckled with blood. He grabbed his wallet and keys, stumbled downstairs, and took a goose down parka from the coat rack,

vaguely recognizing it as one of the many things Hannibal had bought for him. He let the front door slam behind him as he left.

His feet took him to the convenience store on Thames Street, where he bought a lighter and a pack of Marlboros. He was tempted by the whiskey, but he didn't have that kind of money. He didn't notice his bleeding knuckles until he took his change from the cashier.

Lighting a cigarette, he headed toward the pier. The smoke was creamy in his throat and didn't smell so bad today. Christmas wreaths and holly decorated shop windows and front doors. It was cold and damp enough that the cobble road was mostly empty. It looked like it might snow. Will flipped up the hood of his parka. The fur trim brushed his cheeks, sticking to Hannibal's blood.

"So you like the guy. Is that so wrong?" It was Peter, joining him in lockstep.

"He's probably the worst guy I could like," Will mumbled. "For so many reasons. What does that say about me?"

"I'm gonna be honest. I don't know if anyone else could handle you."

Will snorted smoke out his nose. "You think I'm a monster too."

"Sure. But there are different types of monsters. You're the kind I'd want as a friend."

"Hannibal told you to say that." Bitterly, Will tapped a cigarette out of the pack and offered it to him.

Peter sighed and took it.

Nobody else was on the pier. The water was too choppy for boats. Will lit another cigarette when they reached the end.

"Listen, you really think you're so different from when we were partners?" Peter puffed angrily—a new emotion from the imago. Will studied him, fascinated by the workings of his imagination. "Whatever you are now, I saw it in you a long time ago. And still I chose to be your friend. I brought you home to my family. I trusted you with my life."

"And look how that worked out."

"I would do it again. I'm sick of watching you mope around. Stop blaming yourself for my mistakes and let yourself be happy for once in your goddamn life. You've already forgiven him, Will. Now forgive yourself."

Peter took one last drag, then disappeared in the cloud of his exhale.

Will stared across the river at Locust Point. As a former cop and criminal psychologist, he knew all about trauma bonding and domestic violence. He tried to view his situation objectively.

The healthy thing to do was move on. Once he got his Chevy back from the FBI, he should move down to Washington. Alana would help him find a job and an apartment. He should throw himself into making new friends, forming a support network outside of Hannibal's sphere. Cocooned in normalcy, he would reverse time—or he would try, at least. He could never return to innocence, but he could pretend, taking solace in shallow acquaintances, polite and well-defined, sharing the world with Freddy Lounds, and all men like Freddy Lounds, leaving their judgment up to God. One day, he might find color in that gray life.

He grasped at that rational train of thought for a fragile moment before it slipped away like so much smoke.

In this world, he knew, nothing could keep its form. All things flow, all things are born to change their shapes. And time itself was like a river, flowing on an endless course. No stream and no swift movement can relent; they must forever flow. Just as wave follows wave, and every wave is pressed, and presses on the wave ahead; so, too, must moments be renewed.

Will stormed into the moonlit Peabody Library of his mind. He passed Hannibal at their table, who looked up from his reading, surprised, and stopped before the wrought-iron gateway. It was carved with the Beaux-Arts style palmettes and acanthus leaves present elsewhere in the library. An inscription graced the lintel: *Mors Janua Vitae*.

"Death is the doorway to life," Hannibal translated, standing behind him.

"Better than 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.'" Will steeled himself and pulled the handles.

Like a burst dam, water surged past them and into the building. He braced himself against the cold wave, tasting salt and ozone. Seagulls cried over the roaring gale. They were flooded for some moments, then, settling, the water dripped and pooled on the marble floor, a perfect mirror reflecting the thousand empty shelves and stars above.

Will stood at the edge of a dark ocean, at the mercy of the moon, the breeze that beat upon him, and the waves that invited him. Foam curled around his feet and coiled like serpents around his ankles. Looking out at that black expanse, the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. He leapt into its sensuous embrace.

Launched on this vast sea, and under full sail, with kind winds, Will sped down the pier and up Thames Street. Between Peter's words, the nicotine, and the afterglow of his orgasm, he was perfectly calm. Just as it began to snow, he stamped the butt of his last cigarette out on Hannibal's front stoop.

Having heard his approach, Hannibal was halfway risen out of his seat on the couch, face still bloodied. Bruises were forming on his cheek and bleeding nose. His lips were wet and swollen. Half-chopped ingredients were left unattended on the counter.

Will wet a towel and got the first aid kit. He sat Hannibal back on the couch, knelt before him, and began wiping his face, careful not to pull at his torn lip. Hannibal looked at him with wonder.

“Here’s how this is gonna play out,” Will said. “No more Pavlovian bullshit. We’re throwing out that sweater—” Hannibal winced. “—and you’re not allowed to speak in Italian when I’m angry. Don’t look at me like that, you’re not as slick as you think you are. Also, if you absolutely *must* drug me, which should be a rare occasion even in dire emergencies, you have to tell me what it was later.”

Hannibal had the gall to look put upon. “Must we toss the sweater?”

Will dabbed antiseptic on his lip. “Break any of the rules, and I move out immediately. I’m being more than fair.”

“I could store it somewhere hidden. You’d never have to see it.”

Will turned Hannibal’s face, inspecting his work. The blood was gone, but Hannibal would have a hard time explaining the bruising to his colleagues. An outsider might think he was the battered one, and maybe, in a sense, he was.

The Leviathan that stirred in the vast sea caves of Hannibal’s heart was incomprehensible to Will, but he’d snatched glimpses of it through distorted mirrors and shadowed projections. He knew it could writhe in pain. Hannibal felt the crack of the bronze stag each time he saw the Dragon’s mark on Will’s neck. Perhaps the sweater was a tether as much as it was a method of control. It would take months for the bite to fade, and possibly years to assuage Hannibal’s anxiety, but in the meantime, Will said, “You don’t need tricks when you can reinforce my behavior using the normal means.”

Hannibal looked skeptical. “What are those?”

Will leaned up to kiss him. It was light and brief, careful around Hannibal’s bruised lips. When he pulled away, Hannibal bent to follow him, heedless of his cuts. At first, it was strange to have his mouth explored so aggressively, and there was a flush of panic. Despite initiating, Will almost punched him on reflex. But the familiar cologne and hands in his hair settled him soon enough. He was drifting, suspended in amber, and it was good. If he tasted like an ashtray, Hannibal didn’t complain.

It didn’t really matter what neural pathways were firing or how they got there. Best to think of his brain as a black box. Only the inputs and outputs could be observed. The contents themselves weren’t worth interpretation. Stimuli driving action and emotion. Radical behaviorism.

Humming in satisfaction, Hannibal drew Will closer until they were lying lengthwise against the pillows. He circled Will in his arms, dipping his hands under Will’s shirt to make sure none of his wounds had reopened.

Will pressed his face into his neck and inhaled. His heartbeat melted a month’s worth of touch starvation. “You really don’t need the sweater. What does it have that you don’t?”

Tangling their hands, Hannibal kissed Will’s split knuckles. “You underestimate how sentimental I am.”

Will recalled the road map in the glove compartment, the specimen in the chest freezer, and his glasses on the nightstand. “I guess I do.”

“We can move if you like. I’ve been looking at houses in Glencoe and Hereford. They have plenty of space for a dog to run around.”

That sounded lovely, but, “We have to stay here.”

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“No, I mean, for our plan, it’s best if we don’t move.”

Hannibal nearly vibrated with anticipation. He ran his fingers through Will’s hair, pretending not to be excited. “Oh? What plan is that?”

“You don’t know? I was counting on you having one. I haven’t had much luck on my own.” Will paused, considering the way his five fingers laced perfectly between Hannibal’s six. “Non da quando eravamo a Firenze.” *Not since our time in Florence*.

“*Will*.”

“We’re going fishing, aren’t we?”

Will had never seen Hannibal so incandescently happy.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts and sources for chapters 12-19.

Chumming the Waters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tuesday, December 20th, 1983

Chilton dropped his fountain pen, so shocked was he to see Will standing outside his office door. His surprise was understandable, since after finishing the Hobbs profile Will had repeatedly stated that he would never again step foot in the BSHCI, despite Chilton's wheedling. Open-mouthed, he rose from his desk to shake Will's hand. His eyes kept flicking down to the scar on Will's cheek.

"Good to see you in the land of the living. What brings you here?"

Will sat in one of the chairs across from the desk. "I looked for you in Roland Park, but you weren't home. And the locks had changed. And there was a For Sale sign out front."

"Ah, yes. I moved out the day of the… tongue incident. And after you disappeared from the basement, I couldn't envision myself ever returning. I've certainly learned my lesson on letting my address remain public record." He shuddered, looking troubled, then brightened and clapped his hands. "All for the better! That house contained too many painful memories. I feel like I've finally put my divorce behind me."

"Glad to hear it. I've been trying to move on as well. If you'll have me, I'd like to continue my studies in January."

"Of course! Though, in the New Year, I've resolved to limit my involvement with the FBI."

Will bit his lip to keep from smiling. "I'll be sure not to drag you to any more crime scenes. Luckily, I already have all the material I need for the last chapter of my thesis."

"What's the subject?"

"I'm thinking of writing a profile on Dolarhyde." Chilton's ears perked up. "I know it may not be the best idea, since I'm so close to the subject. It's difficult to face memories of that time—not sure if I'll be able to write about them."

"Have you spoken to anybody about your experience? A psychologist?"

Will wore a troubled expression. "Not yet. I'm not interested in seeing a psychologist in a professional capacity. I need someone I can trust off the books. Someone who can handle all the gory details. Someone like you, Frederick."

Starry-eyed, Chilton looked at Will like he'd hung the moon—or like he'd hit the jackpot. Will wondered if he was already calculating the advance on the book deal. "I'm honored, Will, truly. The moment you're ready to talk, let me know."

“Are you available next Friday? Hannibal and I would like to have you for dinner. We can have our first session over drinks.”

“How could I refuse a meal from Hannibal Lecter! My mouth is still watering from his dinner party. Are you still staying at his house?”

“I am. Actually, we got you something for Christmas.” Will pulled a small gift-wrapped parcel out of his bag. “It’s more from Hannibal than me. To thank you for bringing me to Heimlich’s party. Otherwise, we never would’ve met.”

Chilton raised an eyebrow. Will knew exactly what he was thinking, but he didn’t say it. He unwrapped the parcel to reveal an Omega Seamaster with a crocodile leather watchband. His initials were tastefully engraved on the back of the watch casing.

“To replace the one I lost. I had intended to return it right before I was abducted.”

“I’m touched, but that watch was a gift.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have no trouble telling time now.” Will raised his wrist, showing the simple watch Hannibal had recently purchased for him.

Friday, December 30th, 1983

There was much work to do following Will’s pronouncement. Besides Hannibal’s normal work schedule and the necessary preparations for their plan, he threw himself into social engagements. His bruised face caused a stir at the hospital and at a performance of the Baltimore Choral Arts Society, but Hannibal charmed all concerned parties with an exaggerated tale of an alleyway mugging.

He entertained Alana over the weekends, taking her to restaurants and shops. Technically, these were dates, and Will was aware of them, but he never commented. Hannibal was out of the house for long stretches, and whenever he returned, Will was gone. Each time, he half-expected Will to have vanished for good, but he always returned sometime between dinner and sunrise, fidgety and covered in snow.

Keenly aware of Will’s discomfort, Hannibal adjusted their living space where he could. The guest bedroom had to be maintained for appearances’ sake, as that was where Will ostensibly slept, so Hannibal rearranged the study so that they shared it equally. A couch was removed to make space for a second desk, and a table was added next to Hannibal’s drafting station for Will’s fly-tying vise. He was only a little disappointed when the vise disappeared into the seldom-used den on the first floor, which Will claimed as a personal refuge. When the FBI dropped off boxes containing Will’s personal effects, Will left them in the garage, untouched save for a few items, which he stored in the den along with his fishing rods and tackle. For the first few nights, Will either made himself scarce or holed up in that room, alone.

Thankfully, Will’s self-imposed isolation didn’t last long. His white-hot hatred of Freddy Lounds quickly burned away any nascent symptoms of depression. It simmered below the surface of their conversations, and flared up occasionally when they were discussing the

particulars of their plan. Hannibal chose to interpret this as a good sign, though he doubted its sustainability. Once any underlying guilt faded, Hannibal hoped Will would gain a more dispassionate attitude about culling the rude.

While Hannibal didn't get Will a Christmas gift in the traditional sense, he left plenty of items around the house for him to discover. The first was a credit card, placed conspicuously on Will's desk in the study where it sat untouched. Undeterred, he expanded Will's wardrobe with new outerwear and shoes. Will's fly-tying materials were restocked with feathers and animal hair, his fishing gear with fresh grease and line. Accepting the blame for the loss of Will's typewriter to the evidence hall of Quantico, Hannibal replaced it with a new one. He even brought Will's Chevy to a mechanic to have its air conditioning repaired.

For days, Hannibal pondered what watch should replace Chilton's abomination, which he had long ago destroyed. It was tempting to get Will the best—perhaps a Zenith El Primero to match his own—but he had to consider what price point Will would be comfortable sporting in public. He finally settled on two: a humble TimeX Marlin for everyday use—dressy but still waterproof in case Will took it fishing—and a rugged Hamilton Khaki Field for outdoors. The Hamilton was slightly more expensive, but the fish weren't likely to gossip. Hannibal was delighted when Will put on the TimeX the day after he left it on the nightstand.

Their physical relationship intensified by fits and starts. Hannibal was surprised when Will crawled into bed with him in the early hours of the first morning, curled up with his back firmly pressed against his side. Hannibal didn't sleep a wink, so focused was he on Will's breathing. By sunrise, Will was stretched over him like a limpet, arm over Hannibal's chest, legs intermingled, and it took a great deal of self-control not to ravish him then and there. From that day forward, they shared the master bedroom.

Among the many trains of thought constantly running through Hannibal's mind was now his attraction to Will. In the past, Hannibal had only felt amorous once it became clear lovemaking was about to occur. Sex had been a fringe benefit to the aesthetic pleasure he'd derived from his previous partners, so he was not used to this continual hunger for skin.

His body was so attuned to Will, he could sense the slightest shift in his mood and knew just when to press for more. Will was most receptive in the mornings, when drowsiness dampened his conscious reservations. He was most aggressive whenever he caught sight of the bruising on Hannibal's face. When they made love, the depth of the connection Hannibal felt was frightening, and it was made almost unbearable when he thought of how Will might have loved like this before, with Alana or anyone else.

Hannibal knew exactly what he wanted, but Will was less sure. He would attack Hannibal with enthusiasm only to pull away when he reached for his trousers. He enjoyed being crushed against the mattress up until the moment he needed space. Kisses were cut short, and embraces went unconsummated, but Hannibal didn't mind. When Will deserted him suddenly, it usually meant an even more forceful return later in the day.

Will was most comfortable when Hannibal was fully clothed, stymying attempts at further exploration. He fellated Will with abandon, and Will allowed him to frot to completion, even lending a hand on occasion, but he spooked if Hannibal so much as unzipped himself. Never had Hannibal found clothes so stifling.

No doubt Will associated being administered unto with his time as his patient, so Hannibal accepted that he was somewhat to blame for his hesitance. He wondered to what extent it was also caused by his unfortunate rub-up with Dolarhyde versus the lingering vestiges of heteronormativity. Sodomy was still technically illegal in the state of Maryland, though it paled in comparison to their other crimes. In his darkest moments, Hannibal feared that, by his association with Peter or Will's father during hypnosis—or via the more fraternal memories he'd induced in Will—Hannibal had assigned himself a fatal incestuous taboo. Whatever the reason, he allowed Will to move at his own unpredictable pace.

Save for decorating the second floor with silver fir and cedar garlands, Hannibal planned to let Christmas pass unmarked. Will wasn't in a festive mood. He only acknowledged the holiday once in the days leading up to it, when he sidled up to Hannibal's desk to peer at his Christmas letters over his shoulder. Hannibal kept a vast correspondence, but Will singled out Bedelia's card and venomously added his name to Hannibal's signature. "Buon Natale, cagacazzo," he muttered, tossing it back on the desk. Hannibal smiled as he tucked it back into its envelope.

On Christmas morning, he awoke to an empty bed, Will nowhere to be found. Even if they didn't exchange gifts, Hannibal had hoped to share a cup of coffee over breakfast, or perhaps take a turn by the waterfront. Trying not to feel abandoned, he sat in the kitchen and contemplated what he knew of Will's psychology.

As Hannibal's bruises had faded to a faint yellow, Will had become increasingly distant. The reason was obvious: Will's protectiveness and affection were inextricably bound together. Just as he was drawn to stray dogs and innocent victims, Will was most devoted when he perceived Hannibal as vulnerable, whether threatened by Dolarhyde, the authorities, or Will himself. Once Lounds was dead and they were out of the FBI's reach, what would remain to tie Will to him? To reignite his passion, Hannibal wondered if it would be more effective to endanger himself or drive Will to violence. Perhaps both?

Much to his delight, Will interrupted his musings at noon when he returned with a stringer of trout, having spent hours angling in the tailwaters of the Loch Raven Reservoir dam. The fresh air and bountiful catch had somewhat improved his spirits. They spent the afternoon cooking the fish in herbs and butter, along with prawns and saltimbocca. When evening fell and the study fireplace was lit, Will pulled out a book of carols and treated Hannibal to a halting performance of *The First Noel* on the harpsichord. On his second attempt, Hannibal joined Will at the bench to play a more complicated arrangement as a duet. Lost in focus, Will leaned against Hannibal, using his shoulder as a pillow. Hannibal's fingers paused for a split second as his chest constricted. Overcome with gratitude, he turned his head slightly to graze Will's curls with a featherlight kiss.

Their first argument ended up being about the menu for Chilton's dinner.

"There's absolutely no way we're serving him tongue—lamb or otherwise."

"Even if it's ground up in the stuffing?"

"Isn't the tongue just a muscle? You can substitute it for some veal, or whatever." Will looked over the recipe bookmarked in the *Larousse Gastronomique*. "Oh no, I'm not eating anything

suspended in aspic jelly. That's revolting."

Hannibal winced. "The aspic is for the chaud-froid sauce."

When Will learned what chaud-froid meant, his disgust doubled. "We're going to eat cold chicken in congealed gravy?"

"Clarified gravy," Hannibal corrected. "And there is a satisfying irony in serving a dish meant to taste like leftovers to someone like Chilton."

"Not when I have to eat it too. Please, Hannibal, I don't care where the meat comes from, but let it be hot and tongue-free."

In the end, they compromised: the ballotine wouldn't be chilled, and they wouldn't mention the ground tongue to Chilton.

Though Will was reticent when it came to sensual touch, he was well acquainted with the clinical intimacies of feeding and washing, and he was comfortable with his own nudity as long as Hannibal was dressed. Taking advantage of this, Hannibal took excessive interest in Will's toilette, undressing him before bed, combing his hair, and applying hydrocortisone to his healing scars twice daily. Will submitted to his ministrations without complaint.

The day of Chilton's dinner, Hannibal indulged in giving Will a particularly thorough bath. While the water cooled, he trimmed his nails and beard, cleaning up his edges and neckline with the straight razor. Then he sat Will on the edge of the tub and shaved his inguinal region and perineum. Will gave him a puzzled look but didn't say anything as his pubic hair fell to the floor. Hannibal applied a depilatory cream to dissolve the leftover stubble, then wiped it away with a wet cloth, leaving Will perfectly smooth.

After his bath, Will laid out on the bed and flipped through Gray's *Anatomy of the Human Body* while Hannibal massaged sweet almond oil into his mons pubis.

"This is what you did to Dacre's corpse," Will remarked, studying a figure of the common carotid artery. "Except his whole body. Are you trying to turn my skin into marble?"

Hannibal would have wondered if Will was distressed if he hadn't been hard and dripping precum for the last few minutes. He wiped some from Will's meatus with his thumb and licked it. It was sweet and mild, as always. The taste never changed, no matter what he was fed.

"I was experimenting with depilatory methods described in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, chiefly psilothrum—or white bryony—which Emperor Hadrian himself used to depilate Antinous. But the ancients used other concoctions, some quite outlandish."

Will recalled Dacre's case file. "Arsenic, lime… and was that really bat blood?"

Hannibal smiled. "Be thankful I didn't use the arsenic on you today."

Studying the medical illustration, Will leaned forward to locate Hannibal's carotid. Obediently, Hannibal tilted his head to give him better access. Will felt the pulse between his

hyoid and sternocleidomastoid while comparing his musculature to the figure.

“I still don’t fully understand what you meant with Dacre’s presentation.”

Hannibal had been so conflicted back then; it was difficult for him to parse his intentions as well. “I think I was psyching myself up. At the time, I attributed my reluctance to kill you as a lack of inspiration. Normally my work improves upon the base materials, but I didn’t see much room for improvement in your case.”

Will leaned back and turned the page. “So Dacre was a practice run.”

“Perhaps. It was both a lament and a tantrum.”

Hannibal began massaging Will’s perineum. His dick twitched and leaked more precum.

“Would you have done me like him, then?”

“Like Dacre?” That was an amusing thought. “No. My plans for you were only ever vague concepts. It was frustrating. I doubt if I could have gone through with it, in the end.”

Bemused, Will indicated his groin. “If this is the ‘room for improvement’ you saw, let’s make it a temporary thing. It’ll make things awkward at the urinal and itch like hell growing back.”

Hannibal wouldn’t mind making this a habit, but he’d suggest that later.

“It’s more for my sake than yours.”

“It wasn’t that unsightly.”

“Aesthetics weren’t the issue. It’s so I can do this.”

Hannibal bent down to lick a broad stripe from Will’s scrotum up to the tip of his dick, cleaning the rivulet of precum dripping down his shaft. Then he pressed the flat of his tongue under Will’s sack and sucked it into his mouth. Sweet almond and musk flooded his senses. He nearly groaned in appreciation.

“Oh.” The anatomy textbook fell to the wayside as Will’s attention shifted to Hannibal. Flushed, he spread his legs.

It was the reaction Hannibal had been hoping for. He attended to Will’s sack for a few minutes, allowing his tongue to dip lower and lower while giving his dick the occasional tug. When Will made to touch himself, Hannibal knocked his hand away and began licking his perineum, grazing the edge of his hole with his tongue.

“Wait.” Will gasped. “That’s—ngh.” He gripped the bedsheets and twisted them.

When he made no further protests, Hannibal began rimming him in earnest, getting him as wet as possible. This was a part of Will he’d never tasted, so he took his time cataloging the new sensations. Sapone di mandorle. Very clean, very Will. Soft, yet intense. Hannibal sometimes entertained the illusion that he could smell and taste with his hands, his arms and

cheeks, that odor suffused him. That he could taste with his face and his heart. It was easy to get lost in that fantasy now, as he breathed Will in.

He was quite hard at this point, but he resisted the urge to touch himself. Instead, he introduced Will to the tip of his tongue, dipping it in ever so slightly. Will's eyes were wild. When the first desperate whimpers escaped him, Hannibal took pity, returning his mouth to its rightful place on his cock. Moaning in relief, Will didn't notice Hannibal's fingers pressing against his hole until one was inside him.

"Hannibal," he said, sounding more confused than anything.

Hannibal held his eyes—wide and dark—and sucked. Will's barriers collapsed whenever he was this stirred up. Hannibal's arousal ricocheted around the mirrors in his head, assuaging whatever misgivings he had. His gaze went soft. Sighing, he crumpled back into the bed and let Hannibal carry on.

He was inside Will. In his imagination, he translated the velvet glide around his finger to his cock, and it was almost enough to make him come.

He focused on stimulating Will's prostate instead of stretching him out, easing off his dick each time Will came close to coming. After the fifth time, Will began to beg. After the tenth time, Hannibal pulled back so only the tip of his dick rested on his tongue and pressed hard on his prostate. Will came with a drawn-out moan, gooseflesh rippling down the length of his arched torso. His orgasm lasted longer than usual, ramping up and down as Hannibal massaged it out of him.

Hannibal swallowed Will's come and sat back to admire his work. Will blinked sleepily up at him, lips parted, pupils blown wide, as if his mind and body had both turned to liquid. Some moments passed. Their breathing steadied. Hannibal noticed with excitement that Will was still hard.

Still fully clothed, he knelt over Will. This was where he would normally press himself against Will's thigh. All it would take was a few thrusts and Will's fingers lazily stroking the back of his neck. Now, however, he brought Will's hand to his crotch and gave him a beseeching look.

Will quirked an eyebrow, feeling the hard line of his dick through his trousers. Hannibal hissed in discomfort as the zipper pressed into him, but he let Will explore. Eventually his fingers found the button and undid it. Will stroked up and down the zipper until, finally, he pulled the tab and drew Hannibal out of his pants. Hannibal's eyes fluttered shut as he bit back a groan, pulse pounding in his overheated groin. Cool air and calluses against his bare skin were almost enough to undo him, but he held on.

Will pulled Hannibal against him, aligning them so that their cocks pressed together. Hannibal rutted violently before he could get himself under control. Will's hands on his hips set the pace, and then Will grasped both of them at once, and it was heaven.

But Hannibal's euphoria was paired with ugly resentment. He thought of the people who saw Will whenever he left the house and of the women he'd embraced in the past. He thought of

Alana—who Hannibal had kissed just yesterday—touching Will, drawing from him the same sounds Hannibal did.

Not for the first time, he wished he had some concrete way to bind them—something both biological and metaphysical.

He gripped Will's arms with bruising force and ran his lips over Will's chest. Before he realized it, his teeth had penetrated skin. A burst of blood. He moaned in relief and bit down harder, running the tip of his tongue over the base of his incisors, feeling where they were buried in Will. They tugged at his skin with each rock of his hips. *Gently, gently*. He pulled out a few millimeters, then sank even deeper, gnawing reverently, parting flesh to reach muscle.

If he couldn't keep his essence inside Will, if he couldn't take root in him the way he wanted, let Hannibal infect him. Let strains of his bacteria make war in his bloodstream and linger there for years, echoed in the memory of his leukocytes.

Distantly, he heard a chuckle and felt familiar fingertips rake the back of his neck.

"There you go," Will encouraged him.

Then his thumb circled Hannibal's glans and he lost all sense of external reality, so powerful was the force of his climax. There was only Will's scent, the pumping of his cock, and the still pond of his mind, undisturbed by conscious thought. When he came to, his teeth were sunk deep in the skin over Will's heart.

***

Basking under Hannibal's comfortable weight, Will had never felt more like a scumbag.

It was bad enough that they were lying to Alana—using her, even. But having an affair with someone's boyfriend—*Alana's* boyfriend, of all people? Could he get any slimier?

To sleep at night, he rationalized this betrayal with the thought that Hannibal made her happy. They were simply extending that happiness by a few artificial weeks before their inevitable parting—an event outside of Will's control, he told himself. Couples went through this all the time when they fell out of love, and Alana and Hannibal were far from a normal couple. If Alana knew the whole truth, she wouldn't be interested in Hannibal anyway. It wasn't *so* bad.

Still, for the last two weeks Will had tried to restrain his lust out of respect for her. He could keep it in his pants for a few months, he told himself.

It was like fighting gravity.

Will couldn't stay away from Hannibal. He became restless whenever he was out of sight. He'd tried to sleep in the guest bedroom on the first night but had given up after five hours of staring sleeplessly at the ceiling, body lit up like a live wire. When Hannibal was out of the house, Will exhausted himself hiking in snow-covered state forests, pushing past the ache of his healing abdomen. He liked Green Ridge and quickly memorized its landscape and diurnal

rhythms, watching hunters pick their way along deer trails during the day and spying on popular campsites at night.

But Hannibal's presence in Fell's Point was a siren's call. He'd return to find Hannibal with his sleeves rolled up in the kitchen or sketching Will's portrait from memory. Waiting for him. Wanting him. Hannibal eagerly awaited his touch, and he didn't have to do much to get it. Eye contact was deadly. God help Will if he ever saw him in a state of partial undress. Just the thought of it stirred violent thoughts. Each time he caught a hint of his cologne, or the light hit his pretty purple bruises just so, Will's brain short-circuited and within seconds he'd find himself buried in that wicked mouth.

Now that they'd come this far, there was no point holding back. Will was a terrible person. Whatever. That was fine. He could accept that.

As Hannibal ran his lips along the throbbing tooth marks in his chest, lapping at his blood, Will agonized over the future. Hannibal would break up with Alana once Lounds was dead, and then what? Right now, Alana thought Will was using him to get back on his feet, but what would she think when they were still roommates a year from now? Ten years from now? Will pressed his nose into Hannibal's hair and inhaled. They would always be hiding. He resolved to start saving for his own place as soon as he got a job after graduation.

It was some minutes before Will tore Hannibal away from his bite so that they could wash and begin cooking.

"Whose is this?" Will asked, slapping the tongue onto the cutting board. The taste buds were small and soft, not at all like livestock's. "John's?"

Hannibal smiled as he assembled the rest of the ingredients for the forcemeat. He was distractingly handsome in an aubergine shirt, silk vest, and apron—matching pinstripe jacket draped over a chair for now. Will had tried to wear his tatty corduroy blazer—Chilton knew better than anyone the state of his wardrobe—but Hannibal had dressed him in one of his new pieces, insisting it didn't matter. He suspected Hannibal was just prejudiced against the corduroy.

"A lamb disappeared sometime in November. She's been in my freezer since then."

"Did her heart and lungs find their way into a coratella?"

"They may have."

"I knew it." Will looked pointedly at the sausage, veal, and pancetta. "How much is left of her?"

"Enough for our purposes. Would you help me make the forcemeat?"

They fell into their familiar rhythm. Hannibal took care of the more technical tasks—deboning an entire six pound chicken in this case—while Will grappled with the French in the *Larousse Gastronomique*, which, in his opinion, was concise to the point of inscrutability. It kept making him refer to recipes on different pages, flipping back and forth in confusion.

Hannibal wasn't much help, torn between amusement at Will's struggle and arousal at watching him handle human flesh. He only stepped in once to show Will the proper way to skin the tongue.

At length, Will had a serviceable stuffing. Hannibal rolled it up in the pounded chicken, wrapped it in pancetta, and trussed it into a ballotine, which was kind of like a yule log but made entirely of meat. When the log was in the oven, they began carving decorative flowers out of fruits and vegetables.

After bungling a handful of tomatoes, Will gave up. He leaned against the counter and chewed his lip. "What do we do if we don't get his address?"

"Once my residency is finished, we'll have all the time in the world to follow him home from work," Hannibal said, arranging a tiara of cucumber petals over a head cheese.

"All the time in the world, until Crawford disproves my lie."

"He has no way to disprove it." Hannibal clasped his shoulder. "You worry too much, Will. If you're incarcerated, I'll swiftly prove your innocence. I trust you'd do the same for me."

"That'll only work if Crawford doesn't know the Chesapeake Ripper is two people—and you've already publicly named me your apprentice." Will sighed. "Your whimsy will be our downfall."

Far from chastened, Hannibal fed Will a slice of papaya. "It's a good thing I have you to temper it."

Chilton arrived at eight o'clock, bearing a bottle of wine and looking as excited as a puppy with two tails. Will almost felt sorry for him, but he welcomed him into the dining room, where Hannibal was already pouring three glasses of Bordeaux.

When Chilton took his glass, Will noted that he held it by the bowl, not the stem.

"*Ballotine de poularde* with a pancetta skin." Hannibal sliced the log to serve them, revealing the swirl of forcemeat stuffing. "The hen is sterilized and fattened on a rich diet for one hundred and twenty days before slaughter—a flavorful bird enjoyed around Christmas. Bon appetit."

Chilton tried a generous forkful and made appreciative noises. "This hen was alive longer than you two have known each other. How fortunate when two likeminded fellows meet. And at just the right time." He was fishing as well.

Will forced a smile. "I couldn't ask for a better host."

"Nor I a better houseguest," Hannibal said. "I see you're wearing our gift, Frederick."

"It seemed appropriate. Very considerate of you, though I'll miss seeing my Seamaster on your wrist, Will. Ah, that reminds me, I got you two a gift in return." He pulled out a flat box.

It contained a matching pair of neckties: one navy with emerald detailing, the other emerald with navy detailing—a subtle way for them to show their relationship in public if they ever wanted to. They even looked like something Hannibal might wear. It might've been touching if Will didn't despise ties.

"I said I'd get you a tie a long time ago," Chilton preened. "Promise fulfilled."

"Thank you, Frederick." Will shucked off his blazer to put one on. The tightness around his neck set him on edge, but it was worth the little smile it brought to Chilton's face. Hannibal looked less pleased, whether out of jealousy of the giver or because the emerald clashed with Will's shirt, it was hard to tell.

Chilton admired his neck. "You're looking much better these days, Will, even with the scars."

Will ducked his head and focused on his plate. Dolarhyde's bite had faded from red to pink, but it was visible over his collar. He fought the urge to cover it.

"I owe it all to Hannibal's cooking."

"Don't sell yourself short!" Chilton turned to Hannibal. "Will is a talented chef in his own right when he tries. Have you sampled his meatloaf?"

Hannibal's eyes flashed as he finished chewing. "Frequently."

"And how is it?"

"Exquisite."

Will cleared his throat. "Have you heard from Freddy?"

"Not since October. He won't be joining us next semester. Poor man. I can't imagine what it's like to have one's whole family killed overnight."

Will couldn't help himself. "Do you know what he plans to do with himself? Maybe move back home to Chicago?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Perhaps he'll return to his studies one day. Not everyone is as resilient as you. Barely out of the hospital and already asking for therapy."

Will wanted to ask what they'd discussed in their last conversation. Had Lounds seemed sad or angry? Had he mentioned Will? But he couldn't seem too keen, so he restrained himself from inquiring further.

"The sooner Will processes his experiences, the sooner he can move past them," Hannibal said.

"I imagine the post-traumatic stress is extreme for someone like you, Will. As an eidetiker, do you find yourself returning to Dolarhyde's home against your will, re-experiencing the events of your captivity like pictures played on a movie screen?"

Will took his time chewing a bite of stuffing. It was rich and buttery-smooth, decadent paired with the crisp pancetta. “All the time. It’s like I never left.”

Chilton was like a dog with a bone. “What did you make of Dolarhyde as a killer if I may ask? I’m impatient for a taste of your profile.”

More like he was impatient to get started on query letters to publishers. “I wouldn’t want to sour the evening with such a dark subject.”

“On the contrary, there’s nothing I find more fascinating than the criminal mind.”

“Well, then.” Time to bait the hook. “Dolarhyde was—I’d say he was a beast, but he wasn’t. He wished he was, so scared was he of being human. Confronted with his mortality, he was seized by a fantasy life with the brilliance and freshness and immediacy of childhood. It took him one step beyond Alone.”

“Beyond alone?”

“He had the Dragon. And he had me.”

Chilton was leaning forward. “What did he want from you?”

“He wanted what everyone wants.” Will put down his fork and conjured a pained expression by thinking of the hospital in New Orleans—twitching the line, giving life to the fly. “A friend. So that’s what I was.”

Chilton opened his mouth to ask another question, but Hannibal interrupted him. “That’s all the talk of Dolarhyde I can stomach for one night. If you want more, you’ll need to get Will on your couch.”

“I see several couches in the living room we could use tonight.” Chilton wriggled his eyebrows.

“I’m afraid they aren’t available. My home is Will’s sanctuary. I’d like to keep it free of any negative associations.”

“A pity. In that case, would you like to schedule an appointment at the BSHCI, Will?”

“Where you treat your other patients? I’d rather not.”

Thwarted, Chilton pursed his lips. Will could see his gears turning. He was a lethargic guppy, eyeing the lure, circling it, until, at last, he said, “How about my house then? I’d love to have you both over for dinner in return for tonight. Would sometime next week work?”

A hot pulse picked up between Will’s temples as the bolt of Chilton’s fate slid shut. He wet his bottom lip and smiled. “That would be fantastic.”

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts and sources for chapters 20.

Participation

Friday, January 6th, 1984

Hannibal graduated from his residency program at the turn of the year. Later that month, he'd receive his certificate at a fancy ceremony which Will would not attend, but on the first Friday of January, they celebrated with a trip to the coast, just the two of them.

Will was sharpening a knife in the kitchen when Hannibal strolled in from his last day at the hospital, looking just as fresh after his six-hour shift as he had when he'd left that morning. His eyes lit up when he saw the spread of groceries laid on the counter, then heated as he looked Will up and down.

Will knew what figure he cut. He had cleaned himself up just the way Hannibal liked: dressed in tailored blue, sleeves rolled back, and holding steel. One of Hannibal's neckties hung loose at his unbuttoned collar—an apology for having ever worn Chilton's. He tested the sharpness of the blade with his thumb, letting a bead of blood break through his skin. Hannibal closed his eyes to sample the aroma.

Will sucked the lone drop from his thumb-tip. The sound was not unlike a quick kiss. "Congratulations. I didn't know what to get you as a gift, so I provided the ingredients for dinner. You tell me what we should do with them."

"You're home before me."

For the last few weeks, Will hadn't returned until he was certain Hannibal was home—not at the hospital, not at his workshop, and not out with Alana. At first, he hadn't wanted to be alone in these walls, which held among their molecules the vibrations of all the conversations held in their presence. Those stories were still there, but now they sounded to Will like a melody—the poetry of life.

Recently, he couldn't stand to be home alone because he hated feeling useless while Hannibal did all their hard work. Better to run himself ragged in the woods, becoming as familiar with each hill and stream as the bears and coyotes.

That all changed tonight.

"I wanted to surprise you."

It was the wrong thing to say. Like an old injury flaring up, suspicion flashed over Hannibal's face before it was quickly covered. Will sighed internally. Hannibal wasn't ready for surprises yet.

With three quick steps, Hannibal knocked the breath out of him, lifting him onto the counter to spread him out amongst the persimmons and assorted squash. The knife fell to the counter. Standing between his thighs, Hannibal leaned imperiously over him.

“Is there something you desire, Will?”

“Can’t I do something nice without an ulterior motive?”

“You’re wearing a floral tie.”

He had him there.

Will wrapped his legs around him to pull him closer. “I want to see her.”

“You’ll see her on Sunday.” Hannibal removed Will’s tie and unbuttoned his shirt, pulling it aside to reveal his inflamed bite mark, bright red and thoroughly infected from daily reopening. He pressed down on it. Will made no attempt to stifle his grunt of pain.

It was so rare for Hannibal to deny him anything. Determined, Will massaged him over his pants, which quickly filled out. “You don’t know that. What if Crawford doesn’t call?”

“He’ll call if only to gauge your reaction to the display.”

“You think I can’t act surprised if I’ve already seen her?”

“I know you can. But right now—” Hannibal’s eyes slid closed as Will pressed down with the base of his palm. “—she’s not very impressive. I want you to see the full effect, with the proper mise-en-scène.”

“I could help set her up.”

Hannibal’s neck corded as he stopped himself from thrusting into Will’s hand. “What about your alibi?” They had planned for Will to check into a hotel in New York tomorrow night.

“I was locked in Dolarhyde’s basement when she went missing, wasn’t I?” *Come on, you know you want it. You want it as bad as I do.*

“And you accuse me of reckless whimsy.”

Will arched his back to grind against him. “*Please?*”

“Cunning boy.” But his lips twitched upward at the corners. “How can I refuse?”

Will’s pants were torn away and Hannibal bent to feed directly from the counter, more aggressive than usual. Overwhelmed, Will dug his heels into his back as he tried not to rip out his hair. Pea shoots and purple cabbage to the side of him. Thawing rib eye and the knife block beyond. The sound of the linoleum knife tearing through Dolarhyde. Will screwed his eyes shut, but the red meat remained. He was glad Hannibal was holding him down. Doing this in the kitchen was driving him insane.

Will never worried about coming too fast; Hannibal never let him. If Hannibal had his way, Will would stay lodged in his throat for hours, hard and dripping, until he’d had his fill.

At some point, Hannibal unzipped himself. As if removing a distraction, he gave himself a few rough strokes and came with a grunt, mouth slack around Will's dick, nose buried in his pubis, before focusing once more. His tongue had Will writhing on the countertop. He would've come then if Hannibal didn't squeeze him to prevent it.

When Hannibal was done with him, Will lay blissfully emptied out. The bite mark on his chest stung, torn afresh and weeping.

After dinner, they returned to the cliffside house, buried under several inches of snow. On this visit, for the first time, Hannibal led Will down a hidden stairwell in the floor of the pantry.

Will wandered the basement, comparing it to his previous visions of the Ripper's workshop. It had more stainless steel and surgical supplies than the white room in Fell's Point, which was almost cozy by comparison, but it was just as clean. Plastic sheets separated the room into different sections: an operating theater, a mortuary complete with embalming tables, and a meat hanging room where several legs were air-curing on hooks. Will recognized supplies from past projects: bottles of blood and formaldehyde, a band saw, and rolls of linen. A walk-in freezer occupied an entire corner.

When Will reached for the freezer handle, Hannibal appeared behind him and grabbed his hips, pulling him back. He murmured in Will's ear. "Are you sure you want to spoil the surprise? This was meant to be a gift."

"You have forever to surprise me," Will said. "The better gift is to let me contribute."

"Very well." Hannibal released him, and Will opened the freezer.

Hanging from the ceiling by ropes, crystalline with ice, the sculpture was visibly unfinished. The stitching was superb, almost decorative, but her rebar armature protruded at the edges where the rest of the piece should be. There was a poignancy to her incompleteness. Michelangelo often left his sculptures *non-finito*: half-formed figures trapped in rough-hewn marble depicting the struggle of freeing mankind from the agony of its own existence. The opposite was expressed here: the struggle to pull mankind out of thin air, composing humanity where none existed.

Will could feel Hannibal's nerves, same as with his pumpkin pie, but ten times stronger. "Obviously, she isn't done. The work won't be complete until she's touched by the first light of dawn cresting the Chesapeake Bay."

"She's beautiful." Will walked around her, admiring the composition from all angles. "What did she do?"

"It would be obvious if you viewed her at the crime scene as intended," Hannibal complained. "But if you must know, she was one of those classical scholars with a distasteful political bent. The nail in the coffin was her recent translation of *The Aeneid*. Simply appalling."

"Political bent?"

“There’s much to be gleaned from the Western canon, so long as one doesn’t apply an ethnocentric lens. Such shallow, reductionist readings constantly spring from the wells of academe. Best to prune them before they spread too far.”

“A fitting entrée for your sounder.” No wonder Hannibal had saved her for last.

They moved on to the other set piece. John’s corpse lay on an embalming table, fully thawed after sitting out for a few days. Hannibal had sewn the top of his skull back into place, hiding the missing parts of his brain. He was scrubbed clean of Will’s fingerprints, but not drained of blood. His snapped neck dangled freely when moved. Reddish-blue stains of liver mortis stained his back. The smell wasn’t pleasant, but it was no worse than the butcher shop on 21st and Charles.

Hannibal handed Will a #10 scalpel. “For medical dissection, human cadavers are usually preserved in formalin before silicone is injected into the vascular system, making it easier for students to distinguish the structures. But those aren’t the conditions you’ll encounter in the field.”

Will turned the scalpel in his gloved hand. It was as familiar to him as his hunting knife from his delusions of l’école de médecine à Paris. Nights in the gross-anatomy laboratory, work closely monitored by Professor Dumas. Pitiful little bodies underneath the sheets, the unclaimed, the starvelings found huddled in alleyways, still hugging themselves in death until rigor passed and then, in the formalin bath of the cadaver tank with their fellows, they let themselves go at last. Will himself was ageless, slicing and sawing with adult hands—Hannibal’s hands—when in reality he would’ve been no more than ten years old.

Those times were like childhood memories, fondly remembered until he sadly realized that they were just a collection of drawings and some diagrams from an old anatomical textbook. They became dangerous in situations like these, lending him confidence where he lacked true experience. Time to rectify that.

“Soft tissue and plenty of blood,” Will said. “More a field dressing than a dissection.”

“Today we are the Chesapeake Ripper, and the Ripper removes organs surgically. You’ll disguise your cuts as mine.”

“A daunting task. The Ripper never makes mistakes.”

“I won’t allow you to make any either.”

They began with the kidneys in what would’ve been considered a bilateral nephrectomy had John been alive. Hannibal demonstrated on one side then looked over Will’s shoulder as he copied the steps on the other.

Before his blade made first contact, there was a moment of disreality where Will thought this was all in his head and, really, he was standing at a crime scene, reconstructing it from the Ripper’s point of view. He blinked rapidly and turned, expecting to see Crawford standing in the doorway. Peter’s face flashed before him. He almost dropped the scalpel.

Hannibal's arms wrapped around him. "I'm the only one here, Will. Stay with me."

A shaky breath. *Black box*, Will reminded himself. *Stimuli driving behavior*.

He carved an eight inch incision below the rib cage. Hannibal showed him where to cut the colonic peritoneum to minimize bleeding. After that, he stepped in only once to help pinch off the renal vein and artery, steadying Will's hand around the forceps and securing the vascular clamps. Blood on Will's gloved fingers became tacky in the cold air. Eyes closed, he felt the locations of the vessels and memorized them. Later, he would need to find them in complete darkness.

From there, Will cut the vessels and deftly removed the fat and fibrous tissue surrounding the kidney to reveal its smooth, rusty red cortex. He severed the ureter to free it, then placed it next to its twin in the surgical tray, where it would soon be joined by John's spleen, pancreas, and thymus.

"Well done. You even left the adrenal gland intact. I've seen worse from fellow residents."

"There are a lot fewer steps when they're dead."

Will changed into fresh gloves. Hannibal watched with satisfaction as he confidently closed the incision with stitches as precise and even as the ones on Boyle, Raspail, and Dacre. The curved needle dipped in and out of the skin, like fish leaping out of the water to catch low-flying insects.

"You've been practicing."

"On fruit, mostly. Oranges and bananas." Will clipped the catgut with the same sense of accomplishment he had after he finished tying a new fly.

When they had a veritable gift basket of organs, Hannibal vacuum sealed them in plastic and placed them in a fridge.

"Whiskey?" he offered.

Will thought of their first dinner together. "Actually, I'm in the mood for that 1982 Lafite."

Saturday, January 7th, 1984

The next day, Hannibal brought Alana to a performance of *Dido and Aeneas* at the Lyric Opera House. He'd never given much thought to the little love story before—he preferred Italian to English opera—but the tragedy struck a chord with him that evening. Tears sprang to his eyes as Queen Dido sang her lament, watching Aeneas's departing ship abandon her. He wondered what Will would think of the aria. Perhaps, if he could convince Will that they needn't entirely forgo public appearances together, they'd return next week.

He brought Alana back to Fell's Point afterwards. Besides Chilton, she was his first houseguest since Will's return. Hannibal keenly felt his absence tonight. They sipped beer instead of whiskey and discussed the soprano's talent rather than the metatextuality of Ovid

and Virgil. She offered her services as Sous-chef in the kitchen, not quite as handy with a knife as Will, but skilled nonetheless. She made short work of dicing tomatoes while Hannibal sautéd the lardons.

“I’m curious about something,” she asked, pushing the tomatoes into the casserole dish. “Are you purposefully avoiding the subject of Will Graham?”

“I am.” He handed her some onions to chop.

“I hope it’s not on my account. I didn’t mean to scold you that day in the hospital.”

“You asked me to leave Will alone, and I didn’t. We’re at an impasse.”

“At the time, I didn’t think he’d stand you longer than a month, but I’m glad I was wrong. Without you, I’d have no way to keep track of him. He’s avoiding me, you know.”

They’d agreed it was best for Will to withdraw from Alana for the time being. “I’m sure that isn’t his intention.”

“He’s been a ghost since he left the hospital. He’s never at home, never picks up the phone. I’ve only seen him once.”

Hannibal paused at his stirring. “When was that?”

“Right before Christmas. I caught him dropping off a present on my doorstep and had to drag him inside for a drink.”

Will’s startled face under his knit cap, caught red-handed with a parcel, making excuses with a pained half-smile.

“What did he get you?”

Alana huffed. “He made me a swan beating its wings out of a birch log. Oddly romantic. I didn’t know he carved wood.”

Typhoid and swans. Zeus disguised as Leda’s lover. An apology for being a two-faced bastard.

Will only ever brought food home for Hannibal.

“Neither did I.”

“I gave him a journal,” Alana continued. “Has he been using it?”

Journaling was possibly the last thing Will would ever be caught doing, but Hannibal didn’t say so. “Did you encourage him to take it up as a therapeutic exercise?”

“I was hoping it would be implied with the gift. Will is better at lying to himself than others. He pretends he’s okay, but he has that guilty look in his eye.”

As Alana passed him the onions, Hannibal glanced at the expert dice and felt a twinge of disappointment. They went into the skillet.

“He’s a changed man, but he isn’t broken.”

“Nobody would be okay after what happened to Will, and on top of that he’s yet to address trauma from *years* ago. He needs therapy.”

With Hannibal’s help, Will had put the Drumgo incident and Peter’s death well behind him, but Alana didn’t know that.

“Traditional therapy doesn’t work on Will. He knows all the tricks.”

Alana conceded to that with a sigh.

He combined the sauteed onion, lardons, sausage, and chicken in the casserole dish and topped it with a bouquet garni. Once it was in the oven, he began chopping parsley and thyme while Alana took care of the carrots.

“He’s been confiding in me, lately,” he said. “It’s been of some therapeutic value.”

“Is that wise?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“I keep my distance from Will because I’m professionally interested in him, but I’m not the only one, am I? You have a taste for the rarified. There’s nothing more rare than Will’s mind.”

“One can balance intellectual and personal curiosities.”

“Not with Will. Not if you want to be his friend.” Alana wore a pitying expression. “You haven’t invited me here since Will got back. Were you hiding how thoroughly you’ve baked him into your home?”

“Nonsense. I didn’t want to disturb Will’s privacy.”

“You’ve moved your whiskey tumblers in front of your wine glasses.” When Hannibal didn’t respond, she continued, “There’s nothing wrong with getting attached, but will you be able to let go when he leaves? Because he always leaves. He has a leaving pathology.”

“You’ve known him for years, and he hasn’t left you.”

Alana’s face twisted with old resentment. “He did. After we graduated, without so much as a goodbye. We didn’t speak for the two years he was a police officer. He only reached out after he moved to DC. It was a clutch for balance, same as what he’s doing with you.”

“If Will leaves, he’ll still be my friend. Nothing will change that.”

“He’s disconnected from the concept of friendship.”

It took a great deal of self-control not to snap at her. “What gives you that impression?”

“Consider his condition. For Will, hell really is other people. With the work he does—the images he’s constantly fighting—he thinks he has to protect the world from himself. He won’t let anyone climb his walls, and for good reason. He’s unstable.”

This was beyond the pale. His instinct was to protest, but the grain of truth in Alana’s words stung. If Hannibal had gotten past Will’s walls, it was because he had burned them down. If Will was stable, it was because Hannibal was his marble foundation. But a statue won’t stand if it’s melting, no matter how strong the rebar support. Hannibal was used to building temporary installations, used to the plucked notes of his harpsichord fading quickly in the air. He struggled to envision the long-term.

“This is the real reason you never dated,” he surmised.

“He was still grieving his father when I met him. I was young at the time, and I thought whatever he was going through would pass. I didn’t realize—” Alana shook her head. “It’s easy to develop feelings for someone like Will, but I don’t handle heartache well. I can’t be with someone if I can’t see myself starting a family with them.”

Hannibal pictured Will married straight out of college. So young and impressionable. He joined the Metropolitan Police while Alana studied at Georgetown. Settled in a cozy house near DC, he nosed at her hand like one of their stray dogs, finding his home between her thighs. He’d given her children at one point or another in both of their imaginations. Had Alana pictured their faces—floppy curls and blue eyes twitchy with unfortunate inherited traits—and found them wanting? Hannibal supposed he should be grateful for her craven indecision, but all he felt was spite.

He smiled. “Then you can see yourself starting a family with me?”

Alana blushed. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

She had.

“When would you want kids?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Don’t people normally do that after marriage?”

His tone was flirtatious. “You graduate in May.”

Will wouldn’t approve of this (*Be gentle with her, Hannibal, I don’t want her to suffer*) but Hannibal couldn’t resist. Let her think he was sincere. Let her be desperately in love with him when he abandoned her. Anything to deepen her heartbreak.

He was beginning to think Will’s attachment to Alana was unhealthy. She was obviously too tangled up in personal bias to be his friend. Better to end their association. It wouldn’t violate any of Will’s stipulations, not falling under the header of “Pavlovian bullshit.” Perhaps it would precipitate the slow decay of their relationship, but there was no preserving entropy, just as there was no stemming the wrath of a poison tree.

Damn them both.

He was extra affectionate for the rest of the evening, flustering her with hands pressed to the small of her back and kisses against the counter. He pretended to lose interest in the cassoulet, barely conceding when she insisted that they sit for dinner. Two glasses of wine accompanied them upstairs to the master bedroom, empty of Will's clothes and books. Hannibal paid her malicious attention with his mouth before she dragged him up to beat his wings upon her breast. When it was done, he wasn't carved of birch, and he was not apologetic, two-faced bastard or not.

Hours later, he snapped his fingers close to her ear. She didn't stir. All traces of sedative disappeared down the kitchen sink as he wiped her wine glass clean.

On the sidewalk, a pair of hands dragged him into a shadowed alcove and slammed him against the brick. Hannibal was surprised to have overlooked the assailant until he realized who it was.

Will shoved his face against Hannibal's, fur-lined hood enveloping them in complete darkness. He smelled Hannibal's breath. "Couldn't help yourself, could you?"

Hannibal hadn't anticipated how good his jealousy would feel. Drunk with it, he grabbed Will's ass under his parka and caught the scent of pine resin. "Good evening. How was the forest today?"

Will kissed him viciously, teeth bared, arms caging him against the wall. Sucking on his tongue, Hannibal wondered if Will recognized Alana's taste. When Will began biting his lips, he pulled him back by the hair.

"We can't leave any marks she won't remember making."

That didn't stop Will from gnawing his shoulder through his shirt. "This is about the swan, isn't it?"

"Not at all. I merely took a page from your book. I know how much you value *authenticity*."

"You're still not over that?"

The meteor shower of the parlor. Will handled like a ragdoll, willfully mauled. Absent, dead eyes met over the dragon's shoulder. Here now, twisting the knife with confidence that Hannibal had no real way to retaliate—not in that he thought Hannibal couldn't hurt him, but in that *Will didn't care if he did*.

Hannibal couldn't maim him now, and so, shrouded in the dark spread of Will's coat, he opened Will's pants and began stroking him. His other hand slipped down the back of his waistband. Will muffled a groan in Hannibal's jacket. It was nice to work him like this, during a clear-headed refractory period.

"We can't do this here," Will said, already close.

"Give it to me."

“Oh, God.” Will shuddered, knowing exactly what he meant, because it already belonged to Hannibal. He just had to release it. He braced himself against Hannibal’s neck and thrust his hips. But he wasn’t truly an exhibitionist. He needed help getting over the edge. Hannibal bit the shell of his ear, pressed his thumb against his frenulum, and inhaled as Will tensed and spent himself into his hand.

As their breaths clouded the night air between them, Hannibal brought his fingers to his mouth and licked them clean.

Sunday, January 8th, 1984

The Chesapeake Bay stretched out endlessly in all directions, reflecting the soft pink sunrise. Gauzy clouds scudded overhead to the faint cries of seagulls and the lapping of water on jetty rocks.

She stood at the end of the spit as if she’d just stepped out of the brine. Dawn glimmered across her frosted skin. Her legs had been severed and seamlessly replaced with sparkling stone prosthetics, just as delicate as the original and only a few shades paler than corpse flesh. Her long tumble of golden hair streamed in the nonexistent wind, frozen in perfect waves. She was nude but held a demure hand to her mons veneris—a clear reference to *The Birth of Venus*. Transparent stitches, almost invisible in her icy shell, ran across her limbs and torso where bones had been ripped out to make way for rebar.

She held a golden apple at her sternum. Ostensibly the third, but not truly. Will had eaten that one long ago.

He knelt to examine the pedestal, decorated with relief carvings he’d only felt with gloved hands. They depicted a roiling ocean, a fleet of ships on fire, and a swarm of sea-nymphs swimming in the whitecaps. A signature in Roman capital letters read OPVS. RIPPER. CHE.

He’d seen all this last night, of course, but it was completely different in the day. A month of labor invested in such an ephemeral piece. He fixed every detail in his memory, soaking it in while he could.

Crawford spoke behind him, startling him out of his reverie. They were the only living souls on the jetty, suspended 250 meters away from the hubbub of police stationed at the state park visitor center.

“Victim’s name was Renée Douglas, age 37. Visiting professor of classical studies at Johns Hopkins. Last seen at the university on November 3rd.”

“Think this piece would fit in your Evil Minds Museum?” It would be a shame to keep it from the public.

Crawford wasn’t in the mood. “What do you see, Will?”

“It’s a welcome home gift.”

“So you’re still his special boy.”

“Looks like it.” Will walked around the statue, admiring the way the ice melted and dripped, lending it a kinetic element. Despite the cold, the sun had already thawed the tips of her hair. She was transforming from crystalline perfection to dynamic mortality. “At least we know he doesn’t want to kill me.”

“You’d already be dead if he did.”

“There’s that but look. All the metamorphoses referenced in Dacre’s presentation were human to plant. Here we have inanimate objects turning into humans.”

“The statue that came to life,” Crawford supplied.

“You read *The Metamorphoses* while I was gone?” Will was pleased.

“Didn’t have many other leads.”

“Lots of people turn into plants and animals in Greek myths, but rarely did the gods bother turning objects into people. When the sculptor Pygmalion fell in love with his own creation, Venus took pity on him and brought her to life. Here she is, midway through the change.”

“He sees you as his creation?”

“That’s one interpretation.” More self-congratulation on Hannibal’s part. Will would have to bite him later. “It could also mean that he sees me as more than raw material for a tableau. A metaphorical return to life.” *An equal*.

“No longer a dead man walking.”

“On the pedestal, he carved nautical scenes from Aeneas’s journey. His Trojan ships, carved of sacred pine, were set on fire by his enemies. Cybele, the mother of the gods, intervened to save them by turning them into sea-nymphs.” *Your burning mind I quenched with soothing art.* “Later, they returned to aid him in a naval battle.” *You fled, but soon returned to claim my heart.*

At the base read an inscription:

Crastina lux, mea si non inrita dicta putaris,
ingentic Rutulae spectabit caedis acervos.

Will recognized it from *The Aeneid*—a text Hannibal had used to teach him Latin—as a pledge from one of Cybele’s sea-nymphs. But Will couldn’t read Latin as far as anyone knew, so he asked, “Do you have a translation?”

Crawford consulted his clipboard. “If you don’t think my words idle, tomorrow’s light will gaze on a mighty heap of Rutulian dead.” A literal translation. Personally, Will preferred Dryden’s:

Tomorrow's sun, unless my skill be vain,
Shall see huge heaps of foes in battle slain.

"What's it mean? He's killing again tomorrow? Starting another sounder?"

"Potentially," Will lied. "A warning to his enemies, whoever they may be. Perhaps he'll target members of the FBI this time."

"Douglas was kidnapped November 3rd, displayed January 8th. Why such a long gap?"

"Look at her, Jack. Rare materials, intricate detailing, challenging logistics. This is a cut above Raspail or Dacre. Rome wasn't built in a day."

"A 'welcome home gift,' you said. If he started working right after you turned up, that still leaves two weeks where he had her in his freezer."

Will shrugged. "Maybe he needed some cold cuts for a dinner party."

Crawford eyed him. "Where were you last night?"

"Still think it could be me, Jack?"

"Humor me."

"Hannibal brought a date home, so I was out late. Got back around midnight." Will tore his focus away from the statue to look Crawford in the eye. A wave of his suspicion crashed over him, but he held firm. "Does that matter, though? I was six hundred miles away and out of my mind on hypnotics when she disappeared."

When Crawford didn't respond, Will wondered just how much of his story he'd begun to question.

"The Ripper needed tools, a private studio, and a specialized vehicle to do this. If I had that kind of money, do you think I'd be couch surfing?"

"Best not to bring up where you sleep at night."

Ah, right. He'd lost Crawford's respect in that particular regard.

"Fine. Let's say I have a secret slush fund for serial murder. Why would I go to the trouble of killing my doppelganger, writing a letter to myself, and leading you to Mrs. Sherman's tongue?"

"Can't rule out arrogance and narcissism."

Will contorted his face. "Believe whatever you want, but I can't keep consulting on your cases as your prime suspect. Not for free, at least. Might as well make a buck if I'm participating in my own investigation."

"I'll send someone over with a contract tomorrow."

“Sorry to interrupt.” A man wearing gabardine pants hurried toward them. He shook Will’s hand and introduced himself as Zeller, Section Chief of Scientific Analysis. Will didn’t miss his cursory look of distrust or his revulsion at the sight of Will’s facial scar. “Our guy at the Geological Survey found a match on the stone. Guilford Quartz Monzonite, the only true granite naturally found in Maryland.”

“Where can you get it?” Crawford asked.

“You can’t. It hasn’t been sold commercially since the Guilford Quarry shut down in 1925. Unless the Ripper stole a block from the Baltimore courthouse or the old post office, he’s been mining around Howard County.”

“What happened to the quarry?”

“It was abandoned after it closed.”

“Better go check it out."

Zeller’s gabardine pants whistled as he and Crawford hurried down the jetty.

As their figures diminished, Will spent a final few moments with the sculpture. Viewing it from a certain angle, he noticed a ten-inch hairline crack running down the length of her left thigh, exactly where Hannibal had cut Will with his scalpel. He stepped close to block the landward line of sight and ran a gloved fingertip over it. The scar on his own thigh ached in sympathy. Her eyes were modestly fixed on the ground, but the pedestal gave her enough height that Will could meet them. Empty, blue irises, much like his own, leached of color by bright sunlight. He cocked his head, staring, and recalled the taste of her heart.

It was hard to reconcile Hannibal’s sentimentality with the rest of his nature. For a man who’d been less saddened by his sister’s murder than angered that it had affected him at all, he certainly felt… something for Will. Something beyond the cold possessiveness Will had initially supposed. He reminded himself that this sculpture was a monument to Hannibal’s genius and that their physical relationship was an extension of Hannibal’s hedonism. Their connection was as passionate as it was unshakable, but its definition eluded Will.

Looking at this last panel of Hannibal’s triptych, however, Will came one step closer to understanding. This was the end of one chapter and the beginning of another, both a farewell and a promise. An admission of the internal void Hannibal had endured all his life, and how miraculous it was that Will fit there at all. Something quivered in Will’s chest and he realized he was moved. He probably shouldn’t be. Still, it’d been a while since anything besides guilt or anger had broken through his numbness. He turned the emotion over like a skipping stone, seeing if it would hold water.

At Crawford’s behest, Will joined the convoy headed for the quarry. The other agents were reluctant to interact with him. Only Beverly offered him her passenger seat. She didn’t flinch at the sight of his scar, but the silence during the drive was awkward. Will couldn’t blame her. He floated somewhere between victim and criminal in her estimation. How do you make small talk with someone like that?

She spoke as if it were against her better judgment. “Glad you made it out of Missouri alive.”

“You were the one who thought to perform the sectional analysis on my hair samples, weren’t you? I ought to thank you.”

“Just doing my job.” But her tone softened. “Sorry things are like this. It really shook the Science team when we found your hair on Mrs. Jacobi. Some of us still aren’t over it.”

“Like Jack.”

“Jack’s been having a rough time. Your disappearance brought up some painful memories.”

Will was surprised she trusted him enough to discuss this.

“He thought I went the way of Miriam Lass.”

“Come to find out you solved the Tooth Fairy case, told Jack the answer, and then rotted in Dolarhyde’s house for a month while he did nothing. I think he’d rather you were the Ripper than admit how badly he failed.”

“You believe me, then?”

“You don’t fit the profile. Anyway, you’d’ve been 18 during the first Ripper murder. Weren’t you studying in Chicago at the time? Hard to imagine some kid driving across the country every few months to off people in Baltimore.”

“It’s been known to happen.”

“Ha. What I want to know is how Dolarhyde got a hold of your hair in September. Jack’s been sitting on that piece of the story.”

So Crawford had actually kept that confidential. Will assessed Beverly’s character before saying on impulse, “I was having anonymous sex in a public park.”

“Freaky.” She paused for a few beats, drumming on the steering wheel. “Want to grab drinks later?”

Will barked a laugh and turned to her. She wore a conspiratorial smile. He found himself wanting to say yes, but was that wise? He considered whether he could protect her.

Friendship with an FBI agent would be a double-edged sword. It’d be nice to have a friend on the Science team, but more time spent with Beverly meant more opportunity to raise her suspicion. If she got too close, that would be the end of her. Honestly, Hannibal might end her out of jealousy before she even got the chance.

But everyone had an intrinsic responsibility for their own life. And who knew? Maybe Beverly would end up killing Will. Either way, he couldn’t go without talking to anybody forever.

“I don’t do bars, but I do Wild Turkey.”

“Too bad for the bars.”

“Pretty sure they’re dodging a bullet.”

“You’d be the one dodging bullets at the bars I’m thinking of. But you’re probably sick of secret admirers by now, so you’re welcome at my place.”

They chatted about the latest Ripper drop for the rest of the drive. Beverly complained about how little she could do until the statue thawed, but seemed impressed with the way the hair was styled with frozen water. They tried to guess how Hannibal had achieved the effect.

The convoy pulled up to a rusted chain link fence overgrown with trees. A bolt cutter broke the padlock on the gate. Beyond was a murky pond—the abandoned quarry, now a stagnant pool of rainwater—and a decaying barn. Will stood by the cars while Crawford and his squad of armed officers kicked down the door with a loud bang and stormed in. Beverly hung back as well, keeping an eye on him and warming her hands in her pockets.

Ten minutes later, Crawford reemerged escorting a mousy woman wearing a dirty smock.

“Oh, my God,” Beverly breathed.

It was Miriam Lass.

Leviathan and Behemoth

Crime scene tape, flashing lights, and staticky warbles of police radios filled the quarry as Crawford led Will into the barn. He didn't bother sending the officers away and Will didn't bother asking. There was no murder to reconstruct here.

Will poked around the set dressing as Crawford watched him like a hawk. He'd never been here before, so his curiosity was genuine. An autopsy table stood over a rolled-out linoleum floor. Numbered evidence markers flagged knives, surgical instruments, and glass jars of blood. A worktable with a hacksaw, a vise clamp, and lengths of cut rebar sat in one corner. In another, granite dust and chunks of fallen stone surrounded a squat wooden stand scattered with chisels and grinders.

Crawford brought him to a dry cistern overhung with a block and tackle.

"We found Miriam down here. She believes the Ripper brought her here to kill her. She would've been the first victim of his next sounder."

"Did she say who he intended to kill after her?"

"No."

Water dripped down the sides of the dark cistern.

"This is the closest you've come to catching the Ripper. That is, if he didn't intend for you to discover this place."

"The Ripper isn't self-destructive. He doesn't want to get caught."

"No, he doesn't," Will agreed. "He'll bolt if he finds this place covered in caution tape, but not before exacting revenge."

Jimmy Price arrived with a loud clatter. He had a lot of equipment—two heavy cases plus his camera bag and tripod. He seemed harried, having just been called away from Douglas. He took one look around the scene and winced. Porous untreated wood covered in granite powder wasn't the easiest surface for latent fingerprinting. Will was pleased when Price started by dusting the hammer and chisels. That was his cue to leave.

"This feels personal, Jack. I'd watch my back if I were you."

That afternoon, Will went over the Douglas case file in the living room. He tried to focus on the dull interview reports. Mournful friends and family of the deceased. As a suspect, he couldn't trust that the information Crawford gave him was correct or complete, but he'd need to recall the details later if asked.

Even so, his attention kept drifting back to the photos. The artful stitching where her ribcage had been ripped open to remove her heart and lungs. The flawless join of flesh and stone.

…He ran home to see, to touch again
The ivory image that his hands contrived,
And kissed the sleeping lips, now soft, now warm,
Then touched her breasts and cupped them in his hands;
They were as though ivory turned to wax
And wax to life, yielding, yet quick with breath.
Pygmalion, half-dazed, lost in his raptures,
And half in doubt, afraid his senses failed him,
Touched her again and felt his hopes come true,
The pulse-beat stirring where he moved his hands…

As far as gifts went, this monument put Will's birch swan to shame. He cursed, remembering the sour taste of Hannibal's saliva last night. Dolarhyde meant less than nothing to Will, yet Hannibal refused to let it go. He held onto everything so tightly. Every perceived slight, every hint of inconstancy, and above all, Will.

He pictured Hannibal in bed with Alana and wondered which of the three of them deserved the most pity. They were bound in a blood knot of Will's own devising. One of them would have to be severed to cut them free. He prayed that the knife would choose him when the time came.

Thoughts thrumming like a wasp nest, he turned to the photos of the pedestal's reliefs.

"Turnus," Cybele cried, "your filthy, dirty hands
Shall not destroy whatever I call mine,
Nor any ship that grew on sacred Ida."
And as she spoke there was a clap of thunder;
Hail, rain, and those mad children of the wind
Stormed down to lash the waves. An instant later
Ships' sides began to yield, to breathe, to swim:
The figureheads changed into nymphlike features,
Oars into thighs and legs, cross-trees to arms,
Keels into spines and ropes to winding hair,
And all blue-green as ships that sail the sea.
And though these very nymphs once feared deep waters,
They dived and rode the waves in girlish rapture;
No longer dreaming of steep cliffs and mountains.
They lost their memory of their native homes,
Yet they remembered their late misadventures,
Their lives as ships at sea, wave-scarred and lost…

The black ocean rose up around Will, and he sank below the foam in relief. The attenuated moon wavered weakly above as cool water rushed over his heated skin, pressing against every inch of him.

A colossal form with glimmering scales shifted in the gloom below. It heaved boiling breaths, unraveled inky appendages. Any hope of subduing it was false; the mere sight of it was overpowering. Slippery fins reached out to brush him with a maternal yearning for rebirth.

He accepted them as he accepted everything now, returning their caress. The Leviathan and Will convulsed as one.

He tipped his head back and reached into his pants. Black spines tore out of his back. He stretched open. Water sluiced down his throat and into his lungs. Mucosae slid over him, flexing and tearing as he passed through a bleeding orifice. He shifted his legs wider apart. There was a remarkable emptiness there.

The garage door rumbled below. Will froze, belatedly realizing what he was doing.

Hannibal entered the living room wearing the same three-piece suit he'd left in that morning. His hair was slicked back with more pomade than usual. The only evidence of his recent exertion was the dilated veins of his hands and the slight redness about his neck.

"How'd it go?" Will asked.

"Well." Hannibal surveyed the scene. Pictures of his relief carvings scattered on the coffee table. Will flushed and tense, hunched over his erection, clearly embarrassed. Hannibal undid his suit coat button with one hand and joined him on the couch. "What did you think?"

Will crawled into his lap, tearing his coat off his shoulders. "Clothes off."

Hannibal tugged Will's pants down. When he noticed the wet spot on his underwear, his mouth parted to scent the air. He held Will in a loose fist, thumb lightly rubbing his precum over the head.

"I take it you approved?"

Will scrabbled at the fastenings of Hannibal's pants. The sight of his cock, already fully hard, set his heart hammering. "Do you need to ask?" He tried to thrust into Hannibal's hand and flinched as it tightened around him.

"I'd like to hear you say it."

The emptiness between his legs ached. He rubbed himself on Hannibal's length.

"I need you to fuck me."

Hannibal tensed. They hadn't done this before. A hand traveled down Will's back to knead his ass. "Of course. Let's prepare upstairs."

"No, now," He didn't want to think, and he'd start thinking if they paused.

"I don't want it to hurt."

"Why not?"

"I don't take pleasure in that kind of pain."

“Well, I do.” Beyond reasoning, Will lined them up and tried to bear down, but Hannibal prevented him. He growled in frustration, teeth bared. “How’s it any different?”

“Think of how you’d feel were the situation reversed.”

A soft kiss to Will’s neck, then Hannibal sank back and caught his dick in his mouth, pacifying him with its familiar wet heat. Leaning over the couch back, Will jerked his hips and tried to imagine fucking him. Following the commands written on his face, making him feel so good. Hannibal’s mouth would be free to say things. The thought made him hot and cold all over. It seemed… dangerous.

A finger grazed his entrance.

“That’s different. You wouldn’t want it.”

Hannibal hummed around his dick. The finger entered him and found his prostate, providing some relief. Will felt himself release a wave of precum, body eager. His knees went shaky. He almost came.

“Okay, maybe you’d want it. But that’s—” The finger crooked before he could say ‘different.’ His eyes rolled back. “Ungh.”

Caught between Hannibal’s mouth and his hand, Will’s train of thought fizzled out. Whenever they were like this, he couldn’t help feeling like one of those male spiders who had to worry about being eaten by their mate during copulation. Driven by evolution to brainlessly stick his dick in the most dangerous cavity he could find. A deadly form of monogamy. Good thing Hannibal needed Will alive to satisfy his particular craving.

A second finger entered him, and more precum flooded Hannibal’s mouth. It burned without lubrication, but the pain was lost on Will. He was flying. Gravity recentered around Hannibal’s throat. There was no more down or up. There was only in and out and feeding Hannibal.

You taste me now, yes
That’s how you feel to eat me, yes
Is that good? yes

Will trembled. Blood dripped down his head and chest. A stab of fear. Panting, he gripped the delicate bones of Hannibal’s skull, fragile as a teacup.

Do you feel me now? yes
Do you feel this yes
You do I know it yes
Your heart is loud yes

Will tipped his head back, completely wrecked. Black flies swarmed across the ceiling. The muscles in his back bunched and rolled, something living trying to get out. He had to keep his hands off Hannibal’s neck. Keep them off. He dug his fingers into the upholstery.

Dolarhyde glowered at him from the landing, blood gushing from his slashed abdomen, pocketknife still lodged in his chest. Will felt a punch in his gut. The scar on his cheek lit on fire as though it were tearing open.

See… see…

The doorbell was like a bucket of ice water splashed in his face.

Will exchanged a look with Hannibal, who continued sucking him sweetly.

Beverly was too busy in the lab to drive out to Baltimore. The FBI wouldn't come to question them so soon—not unless someone had seen Hannibal while he was out.

Hannibal frowned as Will eased his dick out of his mouth, leaving him to lick precum off his lips. Will smoothed Hannibal's hair back into place with limited success before quickly dressing.

Chilton stood on the front stoop carrying a set of suitcases, coat hastily thrown over his bloodstained shirt. His red Cadillac sat on the curb, highly visible. He squared his posture and lifted his chin, but his eyes were terrified, and his voice was tight. "May I use your shower?"

"What happened?"

Chilton ducked into the foyer and started tearing off his bloody clothes, including his new Seamaster. The watch face was ruby red.

"The Ripper happened," he hissed, wiping bloody hands on his discarded shirt. "I returned from a conference to find a half-eaten corpse in my wine cellar and organs in my fridge. Right when I was about to call the authorities, he snuck up behind me and knocked me out. When I woke up, he'd killed and mutilated three FBI agents and put the knife in my hand."

"You didn't see who it was?"

"If only I had." Stripped to his underclothes, Chilton ran upstairs to the bathroom. The shower turned on.

Hannibal was washing his hands in the kitchen. He'd done up his trousers and donned his suit coat, but his top three shirt buttons were undone, and his tie was missing. His mouth was bright red where it had rubbed against Will. Sharp pieces of hair fell in disarray over his forehead.

"How unexpected," he said. "Shall I prepare some refreshments?"

Will snorted. Levity touched Hannibal's eyes as the corners of his mouth twitched up.

"Do we let him run?" Will asked.

Hannibal tilted his head. "Aiding and abetting the Chesapeake Ripper?"

"It's my specialty."

“Then I leave it to your discretion.”

In the end, Will couldn’t pass up an opportunity to get on the FBI’s good side. Chilton would be caught soon enough, anyway. Might as well be the hero. He called Crawford from the couch.

After putting on the kettle, Hannibal joined him to rub a possessive hand over his thigh. Will had to restrain himself from moving it to his groin as he spoke over the phone. Neither of them had fully recovered from the interruption yet.

Freshly showered, clothes changed, Chilton paced up and down the room. He didn’t question Hannibal’s presence. It was his house, after all.

“I have the same profile as the Ripper. Same medical background.” *Debatable*. “I was consulting on the case back when Miriam Lass disappeared. I had access to the case files, read your Hobbs profile, knew everything the Ripper needed to know. The tongue was in my basement. Personal connection to you: my graduate student, the Ripper’s apprentice. Ha!”

“Why come here?” Will asked. He accepted a cup of tea from Hannibal and sipped it.

“If anyone would believe me, it’s you.” Chilton waved the offered tea away. “I have to leave the country,” he said as if convincing himself. “I’m leaving the country.”

Hannibal sat next to Will and crossed his legs. “If you run, you look guilty.”

“I look plenty guilty already. He recreated the *Wound Man* on my coffee table. I have *corpses* on my property.”

“There’s an APB on you right now,” Will said. “They’ve canceled your credit cards. They’ll be watching for your license plate and your passport at the airport.”

“I have cash and I can rent a car. Jack Crawford thinks that I killed three agents. Do you know what tends to happen to people who do that? Shoot on sight.”

“I’m going to catch the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will lied.

“I know you will. And when you do, I will read about it from a secure location and reintroduce myself to society at that time.”

The doorbell rang.

Chilton whipped a gun from his coat pocket and aimed it at Will. “What did you do?”

“I called Jack.”

Chilton shook his head. “No, no, no…” He inched toward the stairwell, caught between fear of the front door and the urge to flee.

Will looked askance at Hannibal, who regarded the gun with disappointment, then heaved himself off the couch.

Chilton jerked the gun. “What are you doing? Stay there.”

“You’re not a killer, Frederick.” Will passed him on the way downstairs.

He squeezed out the front door and closed it behind him. “Thanks for coming, Jack.”

Crawford already had his pistol drawn, trying to peer through the side window. He’d come alone and spitting mad. “Where is he?”

“In the living room, pointing a gun at Hannibal. Claims he’s being framed for the murder of three agents. You sure you don’t want back up?”

Gunshots fired inside.

Cold panic surged through him. He was back upstairs in an instant, Crawford barreling up behind him.

Hannibal had Chilton face down on the floor, knee on his back and arms restrained. The gun had slid to the top of the stairs.

“He tried to run,” Hannibal explained.

“Please,” Chilton moaned, cheek squashed into the floorboards. “Please.”

Monday, January 9th, 1984

“They found a psychological profile in your office,” Will said, “about me.”

Chilton sat across from him in the interview room, dressed in an orange jumpsuit, hands shackled to the table. He leaned forward, animated. “The Ripper forged my fingerprints at the quarry. He was waiting for those agents to show up at my house. You lived with me for a year, Will. You know I’m not a killer.”

“How long have you been studying me?”

“I’ve studied you enough to know that, with your gift, there’s no way you can believe that I’m guilty.”

“My ‘gift,’ as you call it, is not infallible.” Will flipped through the manuscript before him. “You were writing a book about my kidnapping based on our therapy sessions. *The Great Red Dragon and the Blood of the Lamb*. A working title or were you hoping to publish using that?”

Chilton winced. “That’s—I apologize.”

“Does that make me your sacrificial lamb?” Will took off his glasses and rubbed his brow. “I trusted you, Frederick.”

“You still can. Look into my eyes. See if the Ripper’s black threads are woven there.”

“You know from our sessions that Dolarhyde used sodium amytal and scopolamine on me. What do you know about those drugs?”

Chilton frowned. “Sodium amytal is a barbiturate, used for anxiety. Scopolamine treats postoperative nausea and some symptoms of Parkinson’s. Both have been known to induce false memories—part of the reason you sought therapy in the first place. You said you didn’t know which pieces of you were real and which were imagined.”

“Oh, I’m starting to put together the pieces.” Will folded his hands. “What about Rohypnol?”

“Among less savory purposes, it’s used clinically to treat insomnia.”

“Do you prescribe any of these drugs to your patients?”

“Sometimes, for narcoanalytic interviews. I don’t see how this is relevant.”

“I was roofied several times before my abduction, and they found sodium amytal and scopolamine in Miriam’s blood.”

Chilton sank back in his chair. “You actually think I did it.”

“You sent my profile on Hobbs to Jack, coerced me into consulting on the Ripper case, fiddled with my mind...”

Chilton’s eyes skittered around the interview table. “You’ve never been diagnosed. You won’t let anyone test you…”

“Did I make the connection before I disappeared? Did you provide Dolarhyde with medication to make me forget, same as Miriam?”

“Charm, focus, ruthlessness.” He looked at Will with dawning horror. “The psychopath’s triumvirate.”

Will leaned forward, letting hurt color his voice. “The meat you brought home. All those dinners you had me cook. How much of it was human?”

“Oh, my God.” Chilton blinked furiously, voice fading to a high-pitched whisper. “Freddy was right about you.”

CRACK. Glass shattered behind Will as a bullet whizzed by his temple. He rolled to the floor and ducked his head. Blood splatter painted the far wall, and Chilton lolled to the side, a bullet hole in his cheek. Miriam’s panicked sobs came from the other side of the mirror.

The ringing in Will’s ears was a high B, slightly sharp—the final note of his first symphony shared with Hannibal.

Let My Home Be My Gallows

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for dub-con/non-con and other fucked up stuff.

Wednesday, January 11th, 1984

Had Will been born under the same lucky star as Hannibal, perhaps Chilton would've died that day. With the lowering of his casket into frozen earth, the Ripper's footprints would've disappeared down the grave, providing closure to Jack Crawford and Miriam Lass. But if Will was favored by any god, it would be Discord, and if he danced a waltz, his partner would be Death. All things fell apart for him.

He was surprised, then, when divine retribution turned its eye on someone else two days later.

The doorbell rang at noon, portending the arrival of the FBI. Will swallowed his mouthful of pancetta gremolata and glanced at Hannibal, who blithely sipped his wine. A Buck 110 Folding Hunter burned against his thigh.

"I'll get it."

When Will saw their visitor, a broad grin broke across his face, tugging unfamiliarly against his scar tissue. His genuine delight shocked him. It was the happiest he'd been in a long while.

"Never thought I'd see you again."

"Here we both are, back from the dead," Lounds said, more focused than Will had ever seen him. In the last three months, he'd cut his mullet and lost a little weight. His pink skin had gone wan, giving him a pinched, peaky appearance.

"You look like hell, Freddy."

"I feel like hell."

"Please, come in. I was just eating."

"I won't be entering your home. Care to join me for a walk?"

"You sure? Looks like it might rain."

"It's too cold for rain."

Will swung on his coat and followed him along Thames Street to the waterfront. The sidewalk was bustling with people on their lunch break. Lounds didn't look at him until they reached the boardwalk overlooking the shipyard. A warehouse with wide windows watched over them.

"I'm sorry about your family, Freddy," Will said. "Things would've worked out differently had it been up to me."

"You're not sorry." Lounds pulled out a pack of Marlboros and lit one. Fingers sweaty, it took him a few tries to spark his lighter. "Except maybe for the brats. And the dog."

"Has Chilton woken up yet?"

"No. If he ever does, he'll be imprisoned in the hospital he once directed. Bit ironic."

Will shook his head ruefully. "I was so blind."

Lounds snorted a cloud of smoke between them. "You and I both know that Chilton isn't the Chesapeake Ripper."

"What makes you say that?"

"He isn't smart enough."

Will let out a startled laugh before he could stop himself. "We may never get his confession, but over forty pieces of forensic evidence and one eyewitness account point to the conclusion that he killed at least seven people."

"Maybe so, but I'm not fooled."

"What do you mean?"

"You've constructed your persona so well, even Jack Crawford can't see past it."

Will schooled his grin into his best approximation of sorrow. "We've both suffered terribly traumatic events. I'm reconstructing myself from the rubble of my old life, just as you are."

"You don't strike me as a victim."

"Why not?"

Lounds took a long drag and glanced nervously at the reflection of the harbor in the warehouse windows. "You saw the film of my father's death before it burned. Were you drugged when the Tooth Fairy showed it to you?"

So he had an insider at the FBI.

"I wasn't."

"What were you thinking when you watched it?"

"... I thought about you."

Lounds shuddered. "You weren't kidnapped at all. You ran away with him."

Will stepped forward until their coats brushed. Lounds flinched but stood his ground. Will unzipped his jacket and ran a hand down his shirt, almost sensual, watching fear and disgust flit across on his face.

Will opened his folding knife. The click was audible over the distant clang of buoys. In one swift motion, he untucked Lounds's shirt and flicked the blade through the wire over his belly. He pulled the recording device out of his pants and held it up by the cord as if it were entrails.

"What's this?"

Lounds clenched his jaw.

Will tucked the tape into his breast pocket and smashed the rest of the device under his heel. Shards of plastic ground into the salt-blasted wood of the boardwalk. He leaned close, voice low.

"Now that they've caught the Ripper, have they cut you loose from protective custody?"

Lounds was terrified, but he didn't tremble. Will gave him credit for that. "They haven't caught the Ripper."

"Do you have a new name? A new life?" He was tempted to steal his wallet to look at his ID, but a physical altercation would attract attention.

"I'm unemployed, I've recently come into an inheritance, and I've informed both the Tattler and the FBI that if I go missing, you'd be the culprit. I've nothing but time and money to get your ass arrested."

"Does that mean you're staying in Baltimore?"

Lounds laughed shakily. "I should've gone to the police last summer. None of this would've happened."

"And I should've left you face down in that river. But here we are. Two men working outside of the law."

"So you admit it?"

Will smiled. "I'm not the Ripper, but I can appreciate his work. He's given me what I wanted in the past. Maybe he'll give it to me again."

Eyes wide, face red, Lounds heaved breaths like a bull about to charge. Will wished he was stupid enough to attack him in public.

"What really happened to you in Missouri?"

“Nothing happened to me.” Will folded his knife closed. “I happened.”

Lounds nodded. “I think we’re done here.”

“Yes,” Will agreed. He didn’t move.

“Why don’t you head out first?” Lounds suggested.

“Oh, no. After you.”

Panic. Lounds hadn’t thought of this part. “I’m staying here until you’re five blocks down that street.”

As amusing as it would be to test that statement, it wouldn’t help in the long term.

“Whatever makes you most comfortable, Freddy.”

When Will was two blocks away, he turned back to the waterfront. Lounds was nowhere to be seen.

Friday, January 13th, 1984

Since his graduation, Hannibal had taken to swimming at the public pool on weekdays. The facility was mostly empty, so he was surprised when, at the end of one of his laps, someone called his name.

“Dr. Lecter?” Freddy Lounds squinted down at him, fully dressed and reeking of cigarettes.

Hannibal shook chlorine out of his eyes and treaded water. “Mr. Lounds. What can I do for you?”

“You probably remember that time Graham punched me in your kitchen.”

“Of course. I believe that was right after you called him a ‘pathetic schizoid.’”

“Nothing he didn’t deserve.” Lounds rolled his tongue around his mouth. “How about you join me up here for a second and I’ll tell you all about Will Graham.”

“Why don’t I dress and join you outside?”

“No need. I’ll make this quick.”

It was an unorthodox interview. Hannibal sat on a poolside bench, clothed in only his speedo and a towel slung around his neck, while Lounds paced in front of him.

“A world class surgeon keeping a neurotic little freak in his house. What’s up with that?”

Hannibal closed his eyes briefly. He pictured the tortured face of Laocoön struggling under Athena’s sea-serpents. “You’re here to insult my friend.”

“I’m here to suggest you reconsider your friendship. He’s made it clear to me that he’s planning to murder someone.”

“A bold accusation. Have you gone to the police?”

“I have, but they can’t do anything without proof, which is why I’m here. Has Graham done anything concerning lately?”

“Will spends most of his time outdoors, fishing.”

“You sure he’s really fishing?”

“He’s a good fisherman,” Hannibal said dryly. “He normally brings home his catch.”

“He ever talk about me?”

“We try to steer clear of unpleasant subjects.”

Lounds paused his pacing. “Graham’s good at playing to peoples’ sympathies when he wants. I’m sure he told you some sob story about how mean I am, but this isn’t about me. He’s dangerous. A psychopath and narcissist masquerading as a sensitive introvert. If he’s doing anything suspicious, you could save lives by telling me.”

Hannibal wore a considering expression. “Since returning from the hospital, his conversations have taken a darker turn.”

“What does he talk about?”

“The profile he’s writing on Dolarhyde.”

This tedious line of questioning continued for some minutes. Hannibal kept his lies plausible; he didn’t pretend that Will’s demeanor was all sunshine and daisies, but he was adamant that Will wasn’t a killer. He didn’t acknowledge the recording device hidden in Lounds’s trousers.

At last, Lounds said, “Thanks for your time, Doctor,” and made to leave.

“Do you have a number I could call in case something happens?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll contact you.” He hustled out, leaving Hannibal to wonder if he’d strategically approached him when he wasn’t in a state to give chase.

At home, Hannibal found Will passed out fully dressed in their bed, a smudge of dirt on his forehead and a twig caught in his hair. He’d been out all night again. Hannibal sighed and plucked the twig away before removing his watch and unbuttoning his shirt.

Will required the usual eight hours of sleep and often snatched them at odd times, so Hannibal was well used to watching him doze. Will knit his brow and tensed his shoulders. His legs twitched, running through the forest even in his dreams.

He touched Will's leg through his jeans, the cut of which he occasionally regretted when he thought of Will wearing them in public. He was toned from near constant exercise, stronger now than he'd been when Hannibal first met him. A distracting side effect was that Will was filling out his tailored clothes around his thighs and biceps.

Hannibal unbuttoned the jeans and tugged them off, thinking to make Will more comfortable. He didn't stir. He removed Will's socks. His feet, once smooth, were blistered and callused from hiking. Watching Will closely, he rubbed the sole of one foot. He sat for a moment, lost in thought, holding it gently as though it were a small animal in his hand.

Since Miriam's failure with Chilton and the return of Lounds, their roles had reversed: Hannibal now had a surplus of free time, while Will was distracted. Besides his woodland excursions, he'd made frequent trips to DC to give statements and find a new thesis advisor. He'd even struck up a friendship with a technician from Hair and Fiber, coming home late on Monday night smelling of alcohol and woman's shampoo.

When he was home, Will was too antsy to engage in their usual pastimes. It had been days since Will had joined him in the kitchen, allowed him to attend to him in the bath, or asked him to translate the trickier portions of *La Divina Commedia*. His attention drifted during conversation. He'd sit on the balcony alone, staring out at the Patapsco for hours. Sometimes Hannibal overheard him talking to himself—to Peter, most likely.

Hannibal ran a finger over the scabbed bite mark on Will's chest. The scent of infection had faded now that it was healing without daily aggravation—they hadn't been intimate since Chilton's rude interruption last week. Their paths rarely crossed in the bedroom, and when they did, Will didn't initiate. Neither did Hannibal, unsure if he could handle rejection.

At first Hannibal had wondered if Will was still angry about his dalliance with Alana, but no. His jealousy had quickly cooled to weary disappointment. That burned. Hannibal would rather Will's fury over his indifference.

And yet Will had been impassioned on Sunday, writhing on his lap, desperate for his cock. After weeks of habituating Will to his fingers, after countless hours spent beating dust from his apotheosis of a love letter, and after casting aside his mantle like Prospero casting his staff into the sea, Will's pleas had been hard-earned. He'd been beautiful, full to bursting with pent-up violence. Ardent storm cloud eyes glaring down at him as they took their pleasure from his mouth.

All of this, unceremoniously ripped away.

He laid next to Will, staring at his lips. Would it be rude to masturbate like this?

The doorbell rang. Perpetual interruption. Maybe they should've moved after all.

It was a wide-eyed Alana. "I heard about Chilton. Is Will alright?"

"He's as well as can be expected."

"He didn't call me. *You* didn't call me. I had to find out from a newsstand."

“My apologies. We didn’t want to disturb your studies.”

“Well consider them disturbed. Is he here?”

He regarded her worried annoyance and felt a horrible kinship. Was Will alright? Hannibal didn’t know either. Alana saw them both as keepers to a man who couldn’t be kept. He bit back his irritation as he took her coat.

“No, he isn’t here.”

“When will he be back?” A question Hannibal frequently asked himself these days.

“I don’t know,” he said, and kissed her.

She was as surprised as he was but kissed him back enthusiastically. She’d never needed manipulation to win Will’s affection. She deserved Will’s presents. She was his Archangel Michael, and he hated her, he hated her, he hated her.

Her coat slipped to the floor as he led her to the couch in the living room.

“Couldn’t Will come back any second?”

“We’d hear the door.”

Hannibal hitched up her skirt and settled his face in Will’s vacancy. Alana didn’t protest, too busy gasping and fisting his hair. Adding fingers was easier than with Will. He’d never understood the confusion over the female sexual response. It was psychological, yes, but so much simpler than coaxing Will into anal.

Eventually, she tugged on his shoulders. “Come up here.” Wondering if he could get hard, he pulled away to fetch a condom, but she stopped him. “We don’t have to use one if you don’t want.”

He froze, struck with possibly the worst idea he’d ever had. It was apocalyptic verging on complete self-annihilation, and yet, it was an elegant solution, seamless in its construction. There was perhaps no better way to hurt Will while attaining exactly what he wanted. He tried to weigh the ramifications, but they dissipated in the face of the fairy tale that now seized him—and the wrath that had simmered since he’d left Will bleeding under the star shower.

“Not needing a condom” could mean one of two things. He could clarify by asking, but not if he wanted to claim ignorance later.

He kissed Alana and said, “Let’s keep using them until I can get an STI panel.”

Not that he needed one. He’d tested himself weeks ago, when Will was in the hospital, and he’d known every facet of Will’s medical history since treating his encephalitis. They were both clean.

He bade her to make herself comfortable while he went upstairs.

Hannibal locked the bedroom door and turned the shower on in the bathroom. Will was still sound asleep, stripped to his undershirt and boxers, lips parted slightly. Hannibal's blood thrummed through his veins. He brushed a hand against Will's groin and it twitched obediently, eager to please even when its master was away. He eased the waistband down to free it.

Will turned his head to the side, frowning as if in concentration. The sight had Hannibal adjusting himself in his trousers.

It was almost painful not to take the full length in his mouth, but he had to show restraint in this one matter if he couldn't in any other. He sucked delicately on the head, unsure how much pressure would wake Will. It lengthened in his hand, as if desperate for the heat of his mouth. He kept his eyes fixed on Will's face as he massaged the frenulum with his tongue, squeezing the base lightly with one hand. He hungrily swallowed the first drops of precum.

It wasn't long until Will's hips began hitching. Without the discipline of his conscious mind, his body readily surrendered his seed, spilling into his mouth as if in agreement that it belonged to Hannibal. His throat spasmed, wanting to swallow, but he stopped himself. After one last inhale of Will's scent, he pulled his boxers back up, wet his hair under the shower spray, grabbed a condom, and returned downstairs. Will's come sat heavy on his tongue.

Alana was sprawled across the chaise longue. She tilted her head up to smile at his approach, both victim and unwitting accomplice. This was the final threshold. He could stop now if he wanted. From Will's perspective, there would be moral considerations. But morality didn't exist—only morale.

He knelt before her and descended into the dark, frozen pit. The beating of great wings kicked up an icy wind. Six eyes wept tears down three chins distilled in bloody foam. Fangs passed over Hannibal's head, and he felt a terrible chewing, a fierce rending along his skinless back. Teeth, tongue, and fingers worked in conjunction at this new infection, biological, metaphysical, and infinitely more binding than the bite on Will's chest.

Really, this was what all three of them wanted, Hannibal told himself.

Movement in the corner of his vision. Still working, he tilted his head up to see Will standing by the staircase, gripped in silent horror. He'd thrown on some pajama bottoms, but his hair was a halo of disarray. Glorious as ever. Hannibal shamelessly reached down to touch himself. He thrust his tongue deeper inside Alana, drawing a breathy moan from her.

Will turned his back, averting his eyes from the scene.

"Stop."

Instantly, Alana leapt from the couch and pulled her skirt down. She scrambled to retrieve her panties from the floor. "Oh, my God. Will, I'm so sorry. We didn't know you were home."

Hannibal sat up and wiped his mouth on his sleeve, gaze fixed unflinchingly on Will. What happened next was up to him.

“Come here, Hannibal.”

Hannibal savored the command. He strode forward with a satisfied dancer’s grace, moving around Will so they stood face to face. Will glared up at him from under his furrowed brow. Leaning close, he smelled Hannibal’s breath. The unmistakable bleach smell of semen.

He closed his eyes and whispered, “No.”

Nervously, behind Will: “Is everything okay?”

Face screwed up as if in pain, Will turned back to the living room. He didn’t look anywhere near Alana.

“Are you on birth control?”

Alana smoothed her blouse back into place. “I don’t see how…” She looked between Will’s stricken face and the way Hannibal leaned toward him like a vine reaching for the sun. “Wait…”

“Don’t think,” Will begged. “Just answer me.”

“Don’t tell me you two…?””

Confident that this would be the last they’d see of Alana, Hannibal ignored her in favor of watching magnificent grief play out over Will’s features. His jaw worked. A vein stood out on his forehead. Hannibal wanted to dig his fingers into him, rub his face against his anguish, lay him down on the chaise longue, empty his mind, and fill it with nothing but himself.

“I’m sorry.”

Alana was silent as she processed this. “How long has this been going on?”

Will struggled to form a response. “Since I came back.”

“A month.” Alana ran her hand through her hair, disheveled in the back where she’d lain on it. She laughed. “I’m surprised it wasn’t longer.” To Hannibal, “Do I have to be worried about STIs?”

“No,” Will said.

Alana nodded, shook her head, and laughed again. “This was why you were avoiding me.”

Will didn’t say anything.

“I understand that you’re damaged, but I expected more from you, Will.” She shot Hannibal a look of disgust as she brushed past them. In the foyer, she picked her coat up off the floor, dusted it off, and put it on. “I hope you get the therapy you need. Both of you.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Am I on birth control?” she asked. “That doesn’t matter. Not to you.” With that, she was gone.

Will stood stock still on the landing, looking at the front door. He stayed like that for so long, Hannibal wondered if he’d transfigured into a mourning cypress after all.

Finally, Will said, “This is your forgiveness.”

“Yes.”

“You were right. I’m not strong enough to bear it. She was the last thing I had.” His head in his hands. “You don’t want me to have anything of my own, anything that isn’t you.”

Will’s final tether to his past was sundered. They were free.

It would be advantageous to hold this conversation in Italian, but Hannibal restrained himself.

“I only want what’s best for you.”

“*Best for me?* You thought behaving like *Lounds* would be what’s *best for me?*”

Hannibal frowned, affronted. “I haven’t sunk quite that low.”

“How, then, did you imagine this would go? If I hadn’t woken up, or if I hadn’t said anything?”

“In the best of all possible worlds? To have your child bear my name—I can’t think of a higher honor.” Or a stronger bond. Sharing a child, they would be family, practically by blood, just as he’d wanted, with Will completely reliant on Hannibal for access to his offspring.

“And Alana would be what? Your wife? A spare womb lying around?”

“She indicated to me that she’d be amenable.”

Will flinched. “So she’s…?”

“I don’t know. Best not to indulge in what ifs.” He took Will’s hand, threading their fingers together. “You rejected this child, but I can give you another whenever you please.”

“You're planning the future as if the present is certain.” Will wouldn’t meet his eyes. He glanced around as if searching for an escape.

Hannibal drew him into an embrace, feeling fine shivers travel down his body. He pressed Will’s head to his shoulder.

“You’re grieving, but, in truth, you lost Alana long ago. She never belonged in our world.”

“I could’ve said goodbye in my own way. You took that from me.”

“I gave you the catharsis of finality.”

“There is no finality. History repeats itself.” Will pushed him away, gaze icy. “First principles, Dr. Lecter. What was this act, in its own constitution? What was its causal nature?”

Hannibal didn’t know whether to be pleased or concerned with his change in tack. The ruthlessness in Will’s eyes excited him. With building anticipation, he said, “I would argue, closure.”

“That’s incidental,” Will said sharply. “What was the first and principal need it served?”

“If you’d like to revisit Blake’s poison tree—”

“No.”

“What then?”

“Fear.” He spoke with clinical detachment. “You’re afraid that I’ll leave, that you’ll be alone again.”

Hannibal was silent.

“The fear will only worsen the more you lash out. Anxious attachment is cyclical that way. Only a matter of time before you drive me to my breaking point.”

“What would you recommend, then?”

Will rubbed his chin, as if solving a particularly tricky equation. “There’s really only one solution: you have to eat me.”

Hannibal waved that away. “We’ve already established that I can’t kill you.”

“I could help with that part.”

“Ah.” Will’s words landed like distant drops in a watery cavern. “I think not.”

“Now would be the time to do it,” Will mused. “Leave a note. Go hiking and never come back. No one would question it.”

“Will.”

Will turned on his heel and climbed upstairs to the study. Hannibal followed, watching helplessly as he rummaged through the stationary drawer. He pulled out a sheet of cream-colored parchment, composed a brief letter, and slipped it into an envelope addressed to Jack Crawford. He licked it closed and slid it across the desk as banally as if it were a tax form.

“There. Now that’s taken care of, we need to leave my truck somewhere. Perhaps a trailhead in the Monongahela Forest?”

“This is my punishment,” Hannibal realized. “You’re leaving under the guise of self-sacrifice.”

“On the contrary, I can never leave once I’m metabolized. Think of it as a permanent union. A marriage if you will. You’ll see my face in every mirror and hear my words each time you speak. I think you’ll find it very therapeutic.”

For once, Hannibal was speechless.

“You needn’t devour me hastily if that’s the issue. You’ve plenty of time to amuse yourself. We can even go to Florence.”

“To amuse myself,” Hannibal murmured, overcome by a deep ache in his chest. “You think that I… would find it amusing.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Will leaned back in the desk chair. “We’d start with my extremities before moving on to my dispensable organs. Plenty left to be plumbed from the depths of my mind as well, I imagine. Hypnosis, drugs, cochlear gardens, whatever you wanted to do. We’d finish with a course of cervelles à l’aurore—well, I’d finish. You’d still have my fifth quarter as leftovers.”

Hannibal studied his sleeve cuffs. He cleared his throat. “I think there’s been a grave misunderstanding, Will.”

“Oh?” he asked, as if Hannibal was contesting the menu.

“Were you to die, I would eat you. But there’d be no future beyond that. Your memory alone wouldn’t be enough to sustain me.”

Will was skeptical. “You’re not curious enough to try?”

“There’d be no point.” He knelt by the chair, placing his hands on Will’s knees. “Meeting you was a miracle. It may be hard for you to accept, but you’re indispensable to me.”

Will grimaced, discomfited by perceived flattery. “You say that now, but things would be different once you were free. Any bloom of pain would quickly blossom into relief.”

“There’d be no freedom and no relief. Eating you would be like gnawing at my own leg.”

That gave Will pause. He searched Hannibal’s face. “Really?”

“Yes.”

Will’s face shattered. His eyes darted away, blinking at the floor. “That entails a drastic shift in my theory of your mind.”

“An oversight I should have corrected long ago.”

Will gripped Hannibal’s hands for a while, lost in thought. He still looked troubled. “The problem remains. You’ll always pursue codependency, if not utter unification. Consumption

might be easier on the both of us."

That much was true. There would always be a hideous deficiency knocking its way out of Hannibal's chest when it came to Will.

"I want you to close your eyes and imagine the future as you want it to happen."

Will's eyelids slid shut.

"What do you see?"

"It's springtime, somewhere near a river. Sunlight streaming through green leaves overhead. We have a dog, and you're happy."

"Living, breathing primavera. A worthy future, Will. When the glint of the rail tempts me, that's what I will picture."

Like snowdrops breaking through frozen ground, Will graced him with a small, bittersweet smile. He framed Hannibal's face with his hands, stroking his cheek with a thumb. It was the most affection he'd ever shown without being high on narcotics. Hannibal squirmed, immediately calculating how to elicit this response in the future.

"Are you going to apologize?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Nah. Lying would just piss me off more." But his eyes were soft. "I don't expect you to feel regret or shame, but I have an addendum to my ultimatum: no more alienating my friends. Or killing them. I can handle that myself."

"I understand."

"And if you ever do anything like this again, I'll kill you."

Hannibal nodded, and his heart threatened to burst out of his chest as Will leaned forward to kiss his forehead.

A week later, a wood carving of an iris appeared on Hannibal's desk. Delicate ruffled petals bloomed from blunt strokes, stained red at the edges with what Hannibal wagered was Will's own blood. He sniffed it, but the scent was locked away under varnish. Arranging it carefully on his bookshelf near his *Florentine Histories*, Hannibal realized, as Will himself didn't, that he only gave presents when he was angry.

He smiled. The knowledge was a dangerous temptation to one such as him.

Seventh Seal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunday, January 15th, 1984

Will lifted his binoculars as soon as he heard the car approach. The moon was bright and the sky was clear, giving him just enough light to see an Oldsmobile pull into the gravel lot of the orchard. A Cutlass Supreme—one of the most common cars on the road. It parked well away from his Chevy.

Shifting in his spot behind the bushes, he focused the binoculars. Lounds had unscrewed his license plates. Will watched Lounds rummage around his glovebox and stuff his registration in his coat. He then aimed a pistol and flashlight at Will's truck, approaching it slowly.

Will cursed. Without means of pilfering Lounds's address, this evening was a wash. It was tempting to sneak up on Lounds and take him out, gun or no, but he couldn't do that tonight. Lounds had almost certainly alerted the FBI of his whereabouts and they'd put an APB on Will if he didn't return.

He walked silently past the apple grove and up the hill to sit under the gnarled old tree at the crest. Following the slow progress of the flashlight beam through the orchard below, he took the opportunity to continue whittling the iris, wearing his cut resistant gloves to remove bulk with his folding knife. A sizable pile of wood shavings littered the snow by the time Lounds found him.

Will blinked against the bright flashlight, trying to make out the face beyond but seeing only the barrel of a gun.

"Having a midnight sleuth?" he asked.

The flashlight traveled up the length of the tree before flicking back to Will. "This is where Raspail was displayed. You're sitting right where he sat."

"Well done, Freddy. If you've studied Raspail's case file, you also know the significance of this tree."

"It's where the Ripper got the apples. The tree of immortality."

"So you do have someone selling you information," Will said loud enough to be heard by Lounds's recording device. "Unless Crawford is desperate enough to consult you of all people."

Lounds ignored that. "You've literally returned to the scene of the crime. To do what? Gloat?"

“I’m doing the same thing you are, I imagine.” Will returned to his whittling, hollowing out a piece between what would be the stem and leaves. It was tricky to carve something so slender out of wood. He’d already discarded a few failed attempts.

“What’s that?”

“Waiting for the Ripper to show up.”

Lounds scoffed. “Right. So you admit Chilton isn’t the Ripper?”

“I’m not saying Chilton isn’t the Ripper. That would make me sound insane. But on the off chance that the Ripper isn’t in a coma, he’d probably be stalking me, don’t you think? Obsessively following me around in the night. Maybe he’d want to chat.”

“Don’t get any ideas about framing *me*, Graham.”

Will smiled. “That’s presumptuous, when you’re the one trying to frame me.”

“There’s a difference between framing and investigating.”

“Glad to hear you understand that.” Will tipped his head up, looking at the snowy branches twisting overhead, silver in the flashlight reflected off the snow. “You know, you have a lot in common with Raspail.”

“Do I?”

“You’ve inherited the Tattler. You could be back in Chicago, operating it in your father’s stead, boosting supermarket sales by running articles on miracle cancer drugs and selling ad spots to snake oil salesmen. Easy money. But you can’t, can you? Not when you’ve the chance to be known as the man who caught the Chesapeake Ripper. The straight press—the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, and the sanctified Washington Post—would all be forced to run your copyrighted material under your byline with your picture credits.”

“Cut the bullshit. I’m not grasping at unearned immortality. I’d be back in Chicago if it wouldn’t get me killed.”

“Then you’d better hope the Ripper reaches out to me soon. If he does, you’ll be the first to know.” Will blew some shavings off his carving and slipped both it and the knife back into his pocket. He stood up.

“What are you doing?” Lounds repositioned his hand on the gun. It clicked against the flashlight.

“I’m going home, Freddy. He won’t show himself tonight.” He stepped forward.

“*Stay back*.”

Will raised his hands, catching Lounds’s eyes through the glare of the flashlight beam. Wide and terrified. It would be easy to make a killer of him tonight. There’d be an audio recording of Will’s death, if Lounds didn’t destroy the tape. Perhaps it’d be enough to incriminate him.

If not, Lounds would return to Chicago, where Hannibal could easily take care of the rest. There'd be satisfaction in that.

But no. *A living, breathing primavera*, Hannibal had said. Will couldn't snatch that away from him.

"For the record, I'm unarmed and walking back to my truck." Will tramped down the hill back to the lot, Lounds following at a distance, keeping both the spotlight and the gun trained on him.

He deftly removed the antenna running crosswise behind his front bumper along with the wire leading to the box glued behind the wheel well. He tossed the device on the ground.

The flashlight flicked between the radio transmitter and Will's face. "You knew I was tracking you. Just admit this was a trap for me."

"A trap or entrapment? I knew about the transmitter. I didn't know whose it was." Will swung himself behind the driver's seat. "Next time you follow me, consider the possibility that you might not be my only stalker. I'd hate for you to meet the Ripper before I do."

Monday, January 16th, 1984

"Catch a fish once, it's a lot harder to catch a second time," Will grumbled.

Hannibal sat across from him at their table in the Peabody Library. The gateway to the dark ocean stood wide open. Waves lapped at the black and white marble floor.

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and strength and honor and glory."

"They overcame him with the blood of the Lamb. They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."

Hannibal tsked. "The resurrection has already occurred. The seals are being opened. The Lamb is Becoming a lion."

"Rebirths can only ever be symbolic."

"Not yours."

"Hello Will."

Will snapped out of his reverie. The sounds of the seaside faded as Hannibal was replaced by Dr. Du Maurier, perched delicately at the edge of the wooden chair as if poised to flee. Her fear coiled his frustration tighter. He had to wait for Lounds, but maybe he could have this one in the meantime.

"Come to rattle the bars of my cage, Bedelia?"

She glanced at his reading material: the Book of Revelation, photocopied prints of Blake's accompanying watercolors, and the first draft of his profile on Dolarhyde.

"I see you've found religion."

"When what you experience isn't restricted to reality, your reality is forced to adapt. Did you receive our Christmas card?" He recalled the looping cursive of her address written on the envelope.

"I did, thank you." Bedelia shifted and cast a glance around them. Her lips barely moved when she spoke. "At this moment, do you believe that you're in conscious control of your actions?"

"I haven't cared to interrogate my consciousness in quite some time."

Bedelia paused. "Has Hannibal… influenced you to kill someone?"

Will smiled. "Of course not. He's my friend."

Bedelia looked away sharply. "He won't stop there. There will be others. Next time it will be someone you love, and you will think it is the only choice you have."

"What would you have me do? Turn my back on him? Stamp him out like a wounded bird?"

"Hannibal is not wounded. Not yet."

A flush of rage. "What have you done?"

"I was recently approached by a man. He was interested in my assessment of Hannibal's character."

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing of concern. I can't speak freely on matters concerning Hannibal." She shifted in her seat. "You're drawing suspicion to both of us. Whatever you're doing, I've come to ask you to stop."

"Are you accusing me of something?"

"I don't pretend to understand your arrangement with Hannibal, but I've seen through the stitching of your person suit, and the conclusion that I've drawn is that you are… dangerous. So I'm recusing myself from the situation. I ask that you don't try to find me."

"I can't promise you that. Hannibal's keen on making you one last meal."

"Is that so?" Bedelia clutched her coat tighter to herself. "And what are his intentions for you?"

"He wants me to join him at the table."

“As his guest or as dessert?”

Oh, *that* was funny. He flipped through the Blake prints until he landed on the monumental Angel of Revelation. He showed it to her. *And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud. And a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire.*

“In the original Greek, the word used for revelation is *apocalypsis*, from which we derive the word apocalypse. But while apocalypse refers to the end of the world, *apocalypsis* means ‘to reveal something that is hidden.’ The Book of Revelation, then, is both an apocalyptic prophecy and the unveiling of the Lamb’s true nature.”

Bedelia looked down her nose at the watercolor. “The Lamb was sacrificed for the sins of humanity.”

“And rose again to wed the Woman Clothed with the Sun.” He leaned forward. “I’m not going to kill him for you, Bedelia. You’ll have to do that yourself.”

Later that evening, Hannibal wasn’t concerned by the news that Lounds was investigating him. In fact, he seemed pleased about the situation, amused by some joke beyond Will’s perception. His flippancy only made Will angrier.

“It’s my fault,” Will said, pulsing with frenetic energy. “Suggesting that I’m trying to contact the Ripper put it in his head that I could already be his ally.”

Hannibal sat behind Will on the bed and wrapped his arms around his waist. “Or he could just be covering his bases. Either way, we needn’t worry. Bedelia won’t have said anything incriminating.”

Will tilted his head to make room for Hannibal’s mouth. His breath was warm on his neck. “Still, I’ve put you in danger. Is it always this difficult or am I just—” *not cut out for this?*

“It’s much more difficult when they know you’re coming, Will. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“And now Bedelia knows you’re coming.” Will turned to face Hannibal. “Should we take care of her tonight?”

“Let her marinate. We have better things to do right now.” There was mirth in his eyes. Clearly, having multiple accessories to murder wandering around was a typical Monday for him. Will bristled, not just at the feeling of being part of Hannibal’s *collection*, but at the man’s lighthearted attitude about his own peril.

“I’m starting to think you value your life as little as I once did.”

“I’d rather live true to myself for an instant than never know it.”

Will’s heart pounded as he grappled with the weight of his increasing cognitive dissonance. His choices led them down a dangerous path, yet he desperately needed Hannibal’s safety. His concept of Hannibal flickered between beatified omnipotence and terrible vulnerability.

The Angel of Revelation. The Woman Clothed with the Sun. A firefly winking out among the stars.

He pushed Hannibal down onto the bed, straddled him, and yanked his sweater off.

“How about I get you a gun.”

Hannibal smiled against his cheek as they grappled with each other’s pants. “Would you teach me how to use it?”

“As if you don’t already know how. But yeah. I’d take you to a range. Make you practice.”

Hannibal hummed as if considering it. “Like you, I prefer using my hands. It’s more intimate.”

“Well, I don’t like the thought of you *intimately* wrapped around a bullet.”

“Jealous of the bullet?”

Hannibal urged him upward so that he could nose at Will’s dick, inhaling the salt sweat scent, getting the length of it wet.

Heat broke out across Will’s cheeks and suffused his chest.

“If Lounds ends up shooting you, I’ll go ballistic.”

He nudged at Hannibal’s mouth, too eager to wait, and Hannibal let him slide home. He shuddered as he bottomed out in his throat, glans snug against the delicate, fluttering tissue. When he thrust in again, it was more brutal than usual. Hannibal grunted, struggling to keep his mouth soft and his teeth tucked away. Will grabbed a fistful of his hair and fucked his face, happy to give him his favorite thing.

Eventually, there was a new sensation: the press of slick fingers between his legs. Will bit back a whine, recognizing what Hannibal wanted. He slowed his pace to let one tease his entrance. He tried to relax for it, but it was hard. He wanted it and he didn’t want it. He rubbed himself against the back of Hannibal’s throat in his confusion, barely supporting himself on one arm.

Hannibal swallowed a wave of precum as the first finger slid in. Then another. And another. Soon Will was fucking himself on his fingers more than he was fucking his face. But they weren’t touching the spot he wanted. They grazed it occasionally as they spread him, but it wasn’t nearly enough. When the fingers went away, Will pulled out as well, dazed. He scrambled backwards, guided by strong hands.

Scarlet haze filled the room. A gunshot bloomed in the chest right over the heart. Shaking, Will touched it, dipping his thumb in the crater. Blood welled up around the body beneath him, pooling at Will’s knees, spreading red fingers across the white sheets until it dripped over the edges.

“Are you alright, Will?”

He nodded, panting. His hands were tacky with blood. Rudderless, he bent to the wound and grazed it with his teeth. Thick copper. Blackcurrant and cedar. Hints of tobacco and graphite. The hole was cavernous. He wondered if he could find the bullet with his tongue.

Hands pulled his head back, stroking his hair, feeling his forehead. A thumb ran over Will's lips. Blood scent was replaced with amber and merino wool. Downy warmth shot down his spine as a pulsing fundus enveloped him.

A voice rumbled in Italian, "Tell me what you want."

Will knew what Hannibal wanted, and weren't their desires one and the same? He pressed himself onto his cock. Hannibal groaned softly, holding Will's hips so tight it hurt. Ignoring the pool of blood, Will took gasping breaths as he unsteadily pushed himself down.

The fullness was more than he expected, and he panicked. His hands flew to Hannibal's neck and squeezed with all his strength. Will's glare mirrored deep in maroon eyes among pinwheeling sparks. He didn't recognize himself in the reflection.

He heard a distant growling. It was Him. He wanted Hannibal. Lounds was no good. He was hollow, empty. Unacceptable. He squeezed his eyes shut, so he wouldn't see himself in those shards of mirror, wouldn't see Hannibal lying spread-eagled and weak, wouldn't feel his heart beating quick and light and quicker and light and…

Hannibal arched upward, not to fight him, but to complete their connection. He pistoned mercilessly, absent of his usual measured control. The pain was exactly what Will needed. It sliced through the haze like a hot knife. Chasing it, Will plied his haunches until the angle was just right. Blood rushed back into Hannibal's arteries as his hands loosened, and the distant growls faded to a buzz.

Hannibal caught his dick and stroked it. "Take whatever you need, Will. You may choke me. You may bite me. I won't die underneath you."

Will moaned, licking blood from his lips. The meaning of Hannibal's words barely reached him. He was caught in the soothing repetitive motion, the burn in his thighs, the building pressure. He felt untethered. Like overripe fruit on the verge of splitting. He wanted to let go, but he was both under and overstimulated. His teeth itched, and there was so much bare skin spread before him.

"Please," he said, voice wrecked.

Sensing his frustration, Hannibal flipped them over so Will lay face down on the bloodstained mattress. Heavy weight pressed down along his spine as Hannibal hammered into him, nose buried in his neck. With each thrust, Will's sensitive chest chafed against the sticky sheets, sending shocks of pleasure to his dick.

Hannibal grabbed his hair and shoved his face into the pillow.

Panting. Suffocating.

Relief at last. It was so right, so animal. How had they not done this before? He felt fluid. Thoughts dissipated like seafoam as the dark ocean rose around him once more.

“Others may fear you, but not I. I see you for who you are. Remember this feeling.”

Hannibal’s hand returned to his dick, and Will moaned as he shuddered his release.

Saturday, January 21st, 1984

Fly fishing was tougher in the winter, but still possible if you knew what you were doing. Picking the right spot and the right lure made all the difference. If Will was after fish, he’d be wading in the warm tailwaters of a dam right now, but those locations tended to be crowded with other cold-weather anglers, especially on the weekends. Will needed someplace more private.

Taking advantage of a recent stonefly hatch, he cast a black pheasant tail nymph upstream and let it drift along the bank. He was keyed to each sound of the forest. The plop of snow falling from branches. The peeps of titmice picking seeds from hemlock cones. The crunch of approaching boots.

To Will’s immense disappointment, Jack Crawford ducked under a tree branch to step into the clearing. He glared at the ice-covered river rocks as if they had personally offended him.

“Fly fishing in January, Will? Think you’re gonna catch anything?”

Will looked around. Encroaching snow and ice had reduced the Gunpowder to a narrow ribbon. “Not much room left here. You’ll have to find your own spot.”

“I’m not here to fish.”

“Then to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“You don’t know?” Crawford pulled a copy of the Tattler out of his coat and held it up.

Will reeled in his line and joined Crawford on the bank. Stuffing his glasses back on his face, he squinted at a classified ad circled in red pen:

To my seventh angel. Your work is beautiful. I offer 14 prayers for your safety. Find help in Revelation 5:11, 12:2, 4:5, 8:4, 7:44…

Will frowned. “None of the chapters in the Book of Revelation have over thirty lines.”

“No kidding. It’s book code. ‘Fourteen prayers’ is the chapter. The numbers refer to lines and letters.”

“So what does it say?”

“*Meet me Saturday on the Gunpowder*.”

“For Christ’s sake, Jack.”

“Freddy Lounds has made some serious accusations.”

“I know. He’s not shy about accusing me to my face.”

“Well, you’re not going out of your way to avoid suspicion, are you? He played us the tape from that night at the orchard. And now this. You’re really trying to contact the Ripper?”

“Trying to reel him in, yeah. If Freddy’s right about Chilton, and Freddy disappears, well.” Will shrugged. “Where would that land me?”

Crawford took that in. “You think the Ripper wants to kill him.”

“He likes me, Jack. The more annoying I find Freddy, the more danger he’s in. And he’s being plenty annoying.”

“Your ‘seventh angel,’” Crawford grimaced. “You admire his work.”

“I didn’t submit the Tattler ad. That must have been Freddy. He knows I’ve been reading the Book of Revelation for Dolarhyde’s profile. Knows I come here more days than not, seeing as he’s been following me around.” Will rubbed his eyes. “But what do I know? Maybe it was the Ripper. He could be crouching in the bushes as we speak, waiting for Freddy to show up.”

Crawford glanced around the still woods. “This is getting convoluted. Just tell me why Freddy’s so worried about you when Chilton’s already in custody.”

“You were there after his family was killed. You had to drag him off me. He was shouting that I’d planned the murder with the Ripper, even back then.” Will paused as if considering whether it was worth saying more. “Freddy Lounds hates me. He’s always been academically jealous. It’s easier for him to blame me for his father’s death than accept that it was his plan that got him killed. He’d still be after me even if he didn’t think Chilton was innocent.”

“And do you think Chilton’s innocent?”

“Part of me will always want him to be. Otherwise, I lived with the Ripper for a year without realizing it. It’s hard to face the enormity of that oversight. Hard to ever trust my judgment again.” Will chewed his lip. “I haven’t gotten over the letter, the tongue, the feeling of being studied. Sometimes it feels like he’s watching me still.” He smiled half-heartedly. “That’s why I like being alone out here. No eyes. No distractions.”

Crawford mulled that over. Will knew he could relate.

“You didn’t think you’d find the Ripper out here, did you, Jack?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then why’d you come?” When Crawford seemed embarrassed, Will asked, “Do you have a case for me?”

Crawford pulled a file out of his coat. “We found a woman sewn inside a horse…”

Sunday, January 22nd, 1984

Head in Hannibal’s lap, Will flipped through Sarah Craber’s autopsy report and the pictures from the Blackbriar Stables. Fingers combed through his hair. The fireplace crackled before them.

“Whoever put her in the horse didn’t kill her. This wasn’t murder. This was grief.”

“One dead creature giving birth to another,” Hannibal mused. “The bird, his victim’s new beating heart. Her soul given wings. Is there a suspect?”

“A stable hand with a head injury who looks guilty as hell. Crawford’s already chomping at the bit for a warrant. It’s not him though.” Will sighed. “He just wanted to bring poetry to something so ugly.”

“If he found her grave, he must know something of her killer.”

“I’m going to speak with him tomorrow. Hopefully I can convince him to talk.” Will paused. “If he gives me a name, should I tell Crawford or keep it to myself?”

“Already considering extrajudicial punishment?”

“A spare murderer waiting in the wings could come in handy. Whoever killed Craber could’ve killed Lounds—or any number of people for that matter—as long as they were consistent with his pattern.”

“It may be wiser to limit your personal connection to cases for now.”

Hannibal was right. Handing this killer to Crawford unsullied would help earn his trust. Will tossed the file on the table and shoved his nose into Hannibal’s sweater.

“Still, I’d like to scope him out for a while. Make sure there’s enough evidence to sink him. Otherwise they’ll put that stable hand away.”

Hannibal smiled fondly. “Do you think that if you can save him, you can save yourself?”

Will chuckled. “There’s no saving me.” He recalled the stable hand’s endearing concern for the starling found in Craber’s heart. *I’m sad for her. I’m sad for the horse. But I can only help the bird.* “I just want to be his friend.”

Hannibal's fingers paused momentarily in his curls and Will felt a twinge of worry. He'd made it clear that he'd leave Hannibal if he messed with anyone in Will's circle, but Hannibal had never been great with boundaries.

Will twisted lower to nuzzle at Hannibal's pants, heating the cloth with his breath.

Hannibal spread his legs minutely and massaged the base of Will's head. His fingers sent electric shockwaves down Will's back. At length, he asked, "May I accompany you on this venture?"

Will was considering that when the doorbell rang. He patted Hannibal's knee as he got up. "I'll get it."

He expected Beverly or Crawford with an update on the Craber case. The last person he anticipated was Alana. Face closed, she braced her shoulders and hugged her coat tighter.

Will could hardly believe she was real. Repressed guilt slammed into him—a better man, a stronger man, would have left Hannibal for what he did to her—but also a piercing glint of hope. If their friendship was recoverable in any way… But surely that was impossible. Potential futures winked in and out of existence as he scrambled to order his scattered thoughts.

"You came back."

"This isn't a friendly visit. Can I come in?"

Speechless, Will stood aside. She passed within inches of him, close enough to smell her perfume. She didn't allow him to take her coat.

Annoyance flickered across Hannibal's face upon seeing her, imperceptible to anyone besides Will. He rose gracefully from the couch and bowed his head.

"I have no excuse for my behavior last week. There's no undoing the hurt I caused, but I offer my most sincere apologies."

It was a convincing recitation, but Alana didn't acknowledge him. Didn't even look at him. Will couldn't blame her.

She hovered by the landing as if unsure if she wanted to come closer, eyes fixed on Will. "I came to convince myself of something. Or maybe I'm trying to convince you." She was pensive, struggling with confrontation. "Or maybe I don't know why I'm here."

"I'll do anything if I can make things up to you. Even a little."

"Then forget about the Chesapeake Ripper."

The floor fell out from under him. "Forget about—what?"

"Freddy Lounds approached me on campus today to ask what you were like at UChicago. If you had a car or ever left for days at a time."

Will poured himself a finger of whiskey and knocked it back. He'd owned his Chevy back then and had often taken extended weekend trips as an excuse to avoid people.

"What did you say?"

"I told him that you did. Then he played a tape for me. 'I'd hate for you to meet the Ripper before I do.' Really, Will?"

The irony of Alana, of all people, siding with Lounds was unmatched.

"*Freddy Lounds is a pig*," he growled and instantly regretted it. He rubbed his forehead, trying to contain his anger. Where were his glasses?

"You think he deserves to be someone's bacon?"

Will glanced at Hannibal, who looked as elated as a kid in a candy store. He'd be no help. "I just want him to leave me alone."

"Contacting the Ripper isn't the solution. Neither is consulting for Jack Crawford. This isn't good for you, Will."

"I'm fine."

Her voice raised. "I don't think you are. You've been acting strange for a while now. Since before your kidnapping, before the Ripper, before everything. I don't recognize you anymore."

"I deceived you. And—yeah, I'm with this piece of shit. I've no excuse. You have every right to be mad at me, but—"

"You feel as though Will is becoming someone else," Hannibal suggested.

Will stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Yes," Alana breathed.

Hannibal turned to him, wearing mechanical concern. "You spend so much time outdoors, we barely see each other. When we're together, you only talk about Freddy Lounds. I'm beginning to worry about you, Will."

Will braced himself against the kitchen counter. "What is this?"

Alana's alarm grew. "Does Freddy know something that we don't?"

"He's blackmailing Will. About what, I don't know."

Hannibal was crossing so many boundaries, Will could hardly make them out as they flew by. It took all his concentration to control his anger. He slipped on a mask of indifference, but his hands shook.

Alana stepped toward him as one would a skittish animal. “Did Hobbs and Dolarhyde open a door you couldn’t close?”

“My doors are firmly closed, I assure you.” With sudden clarity, he knew where this was going. He cast around for a way out.

“If you’ve done something, or gotten yourself involved with someone, I can help you.”

Even now, after everything, and thinking he might be a murderer, she was worried for him. It made what he was about to say even more difficult.

With as much acid as he could muster, he said, “I was fucking your boyfriend, not killing people. Why don’t you cry about it in your diary instead of dragging me into whatever group therapy this is?”

Anger bloomed on her face. Will felt her hurt as if it were his own.

“If this is a relapse—”

“You’ve got me dressed up in moral dignity pants, hoping my actions can be explained by some disease. I’m not sick, Alana. I’m just an asshole.”

“...Is Freddy in danger?”

“He’s a danger to himself more than anything.”

“*Stop lying to me*.”

Will approached her, keeping his voice as measured as possible. “I don’t want your help. I don’t want your forgiveness. I don’t want to see you again. Now *leave*.” *While you still can*.

Alana had more to say, but she set her jaw and stormed out. When the front door slammed shut, Will rounded on Hannibal, who stood unflinching. He had half a mind to throw his lowball glass in a high ball pitch directly at his head.

“What the hell was that.”

“A nudge in the right direction.”

“Steering me on a course that suits your purposes. *Not mine*.”

“Alana is no longer your friend and therefore not protected under your stipulation.” Hannibal fished a set of keys from a drawer and slid them across the counter. “You know what needs to be done, Will. And you’re the one who needs to do it.”

Sudden cold fear struck him. “No. Not her.”

“If it isn’t her, then it’ll be somebody else. It’s time for you to choose.”

Knowing he was right didn't make Will feel any better. "This is what you want me to become. This is your design for me."

"No, Will. This is your design."

Hannibal really was the devil. Blinking back tears, Will picked up the keys and followed Alana into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts and sources for chapters 21-24.

Apocalypsis

Monday, January 23rd, 1984

Will parked outside Alana's apartment in a black Jaguar XJS—a recent acquisition yet to be discovered by Freddy Lounds. Like Hannibal's Bentley, it was custom supercharged. Supercharged, not turbocharged. A blown, big displacement V8 with power down low, and not peaky. Will had felt like an ass driving it at first—he'd rather a budget car for stealth—but he'd quickly come to appreciate the perfect handling and comfortable seat. If the Jaguar was a purebred greyhound, Will's Chevy beater was a mutt, but that wasn't its fault. They were both well-trained sweethearts, and he was equally fond of them.

He stared at Alana's bedroom window from his hunched seat over the steering wheel, chewing several tablets of Bufferin. The light had gone out three hours ago around midnight. He told himself waiting was safer, but that was just procrastination. He didn't want to do this at all.

Driving back to Fell's Point empty-handed wasn't an option. But he could drive to Mexico. Or maybe off a cliff.

Where had it all gone wrong? When he shot Drumgo in the head? Took the graduate position under Chilton? Interviewed Hobbs? Would he be sitting outside some other woman's house had he stuck to fixing boat motors in Louisiana?

These were the questions he asked himself as he opened Alana's door with Hannibal's copy of her key. He'd envisioned breaking and entering so many times during his days as a homicide detective, it came as second nature now. From his handful of visits, he knew how to swing the door shut silently, which floorboards creaked, and the shortest path to Alana's bedroom.

She slept peacefully in the bluish glow of the mercury-vapor streetlamp, hair spread in a glossy pool across her pillow—just like Mrs. Sherman's. Will stood at her bedside, admiring her. She really was beautiful.

He'd been able to stop six months ago, when he'd let Lounds go. He considered stopping now. He wanted to.

But he couldn't.

From his jacket pocket he pulled out a syringe, the needle as fine as a hair, and, lifting the sleeve of her sleep shirt, he slipped it into her arm. When he withdrew it, the tiny wound did not even bleed.

Gradually, her breathing slowed, her eyes stopped twitching under their lids, and her sleep movements ceased altogether. Through latex gloves, he felt her pulse.

Sluggish, but strong and even. He sighed in relief.

To business then.

He started with her messenger bag, digging past loose receipts and a pack of gum to rifle through the contents of her wallet and notebook. When that didn't prove fruitful, he moved onto her desk. It was tidy, drawers filled with medical textbooks and study materials. He expected her planner to have "report Will Graham to FBI" written in it, but there were no mentions of him. Not many appointments, just the typical hectic schedule of a medical student. Looked like she was doing a sub-internship at the DC general hospital ICU. Will smiled to see so much time blocked out for her friends.

He flipped through the entire planner, memorizing her schedule for the next week, but still didn't find anything. Nothing in her address book either, though he noted that Hannibal's entry had been struck out with black marker. Good for her.

Still nothing in her office waste bin, so he moved to the bathroom. Tissues, makeup wipes, hair. He froze when he saw the test stick. He had no right to be even a little curious, but there it was, already in full view. Negative. It'd been ten days, so still in the gray area of whether the result meant anything, but he nevertheless felt overwhelming relief. He rubbed his chest, guilt rising again. *Fucking Hannibal.*

Less relieving was his unsuccessful hunt. Nothing in the bedroom, the bathroom, or anywhere else. The birch swan carving was nowhere to be found either, he sadly noted. He sat in the living room and wracked his brain on where else she might keep Lounds's contact information, if he'd even given it to her.

If he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend that the last year hadn't happened, and he was simply spending the night on Alana's couch after they'd had a few drinks. He supposed this was the last time he'd ever be here. He was tempted to steal something small, like a pen or fridge magnet, as a keepsake, but settled for memorizing each detail of the space, so he could return whenever he wanted. God, he was such a creep.

Without recourse, he left. It was a long, cold night in the driver's seat.

For the next two days, Will followed Alana wherever she went while Hannibal made his excuses to Crawford back in Baltimore. This meant a lot of sitting outside the ICU where she spent most of her time. Tinted windows and crowded parking lots were his friend. After work, if she had the energy, she hung out at a pub or stopped at a grocery store. It was nice to see her living a normal life, but he could tell she wasn't happy. Her gaze would go unfocused, and she'd stare into space. Once, she sat in her Volvo and screamed at the top of her lungs, slamming the wheel in frustration. Down the street, Will sat in Hannibal's Jaguar, wishing he could do the same.

With every night passed outside her bedroom window, Will expected her to notice her stalker and alert the police, but she never did. He found himself getting angry at her for being so trusting. If after everything that happened, she didn't suspect Will might want to kill her, what would happen if an actual—well…a *real*—well. He cut off that thought before he could finish it.

It was Wednesday evening and Will was waiting outside the hospital for Alana to come out as per usual. The Jaguar was tucked away in a shadowy corner of the parking lot, but he had a good view of the ICU entrance. Empty take out wrappers and cans of soup littered the backseat.

He didn't immediately perk up when an Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme turned into the lot, but his every nerve lit on fire when Freddy Lounds stepped out of it. Will sank further down the driver's seat and watched as he entered the hospital.

The Oldsmobile had its license plates on. Those seven characters seared into his retinas, burning so bright it was almost painful. Their afterimage glowed on the back of his eyelids each time he blinked. They could be fake, he told himself, but that didn't quell his building excitement.

Lounds emerged from the ICU an hour later. Will started the Jaguar as Lounds pulled out of his spot, then followed him out of the parking lot. Soon they were both headed north on I-295 toward Baltimore.

Thursday, January 26th, 1984

Freddy's house—a well-appointed and secure rental on the outskirts of a wealthy Baltimore suburb—smelled of hair tonic and aftershave, socks and cigars. Keyed up from several cups of coffee, he paced before his bulletin board covered in photos, newspaper clippings, and red string, just like he'd always seen in the movies. Lately, his life had taken on the quality of a movie, as he knew it would be one day. Hollywood was a fine place for obnoxious fellows with money.

Fame and fortune would be his, as was his right. No academic credentials needed. But what he *really* wanted was Graham dead.

Freddy was aware at a very young age his willingness to inflict damage around him. His father called it "altruistic punishment." With the help of father's lawyers, he got a walk on the charges from his university days. After that, he was a good little columnist at the Tattler—for a while. Then father shipped him to Baltimore to pursue a farce of a graduate degree until the water cooled off in Chicago.

Freddy had recognized a fellow fun-lover when he'd first shaken Graham's hand in Chilton's office, but Graham hadn't wanted to be his friend. The little prick was so full of himself he was coming out the other end. Freddy had gotten a kick out of pushing his buttons—until he'd woken up on the riverbank with a cerebral contusion. He'd underestimated Graham. Obviously, they had different ideas of *fun*.

At the time, he'd been happy to have involved Graham in something unethical. Freddy might've bullied him into writing his entire thesis the way he'd bullied him into dangling off a hook for the Ripper.

Of course, that plan had crumbled when his entire family had been murdered. Graham had planned it. Freddy *knew* he had. After Graham returned from his holiday in Missouri, Freddy

had gone to Crawford and every other connection he had in law enforcement. No one else saw that Graham had gotten exactly what he wanted out of the situation, all without lifting a finger.

Oh, Graham was smart. But Freddy was smarter.

Without father around anymore, he had to be very careful about dealing with Graham. It was tempting to just have him killed, but his resources and connections were not limitless enough to take on the FBI. And Graham's assassination would paint him in a positive light. Freddy wanted him smeared across every august journal in the nation. He wanted Graham's face blown up on the front page of the holy New York Times: *KITCHEN NIGHTMARE: FBI CONSULTS RIPPER ON OWN INVESTIGATION. By Freddy Lounds.* Graham would get the needle while Freddy sipped Mai Tais on Malibu beach.

But first he had to catch him, and Graham was tricky, as he'd proven with the radio transmitter and the Tattler ad.

Freddy's recent interview with Bloom opened a new line of reasoning. Distraught, she'd told him that Graham had been mentally unstable ever since he'd interviewed Hobbs over the summer. According to her, even that queer European chap Graham lived with was concerned about him. She'd been vague on the particulars, but she was the first witness who believed that Freddy might be right, and her story lined up with Graham's attempt on Freddy's life in July.

Freddy had never considered that Graham might be having a relapse. He always seemed so sure of himself. More psychopathic than psychotic.

He turned to the other piece of evidence that didn't fit with his narrative. Graham's hair shaft analysis was the only concrete evidence of his kidnapping. Even Freddy admitted that sodium amytal and scopolamine weren't the type of drugs you'd whip out for good times with a buddy. It was the same cocktail used on Miriam Lass, only her stay with the Ripper had been much longer. If Graham was the Ripper, that meant he'd been… drugging himself? Freebasing his alibi for a month straight? It seemed unlikely.

Say Graham *had* been kidnapped back in October. Based on the drug test, wouldn't it make more sense for the Ripper to have done it? Where was the proof it had been Dolarhyde? When the mansion had burned down, everyone had assumed Graham was the victim instead of the arsonist.

If Graham had been kidnapped by the Ripper and they'd framed Dolarhyde for it, that meant Graham had not only been in contact with the Ripper, but actively collaborating with him since November at least. Two killers working together would make constructing alibis a lot easier. Murder and tableau creation could be split up into two nights, with each partner having an alibi for one of them. Freddy resolved to review his notes with this in mind.

The question was, who had enough contact with Graham to be his partner?

He was on the verge of a breakthrough. Jittery with excitement, he drew a crude silhouette of a man with a big question mark at his center and added it to his bulletin board. A short red

string connected it to the picture of Will Graham.

Freddy felt good, but he needed to relax. He hopped into his Oldsmobile, thinking he'd hit up his girl Wendy from the topless bar. He'd been stringing her along for weeks now, saying he'd cosign ownership of the club so she wouldn't have to dance no more. He wouldn't ever go through with it, of course, but sweet Wendy didn't know that.

As he turned out of the cul-de-sac, he ogled his neighbor's new Jaguar. Freddy had owned a Lincoln Versailles before this mess, and he missed it dearly. Soon he'd have another luxury car, even better than the Lincoln or the Jaguar. He whistled a Billy Idol tune, picturing himself joyriding in a convertible in sunny Los Angeles.

He was on an empty stretch of road leading to the highway when his car began to chug in fits and starts. Freddy cursed as he coasted to the breakdown lane. The engine rattled, clunked, and finally died. It wouldn't start no matter how much he cranked the key. With an annoyed sigh, he got out of the car to look under the hood.

An approaching pair of headlights pierced the dark, bouncing off the rain-slick pavement. Freddy waved it down, squinting against the glare to make out the driver as he pulled to a stop behind his Oldsmobile.

"Dunno what's wrong with it," Freddy said as the man got out of the car and walked toward him. "Might've hit a rock or something."

When the man's face resolved, Freddy's blood ran cold. "Oh, my God."

"Do you need help?" Dr. Lecter asked politely, mere feet away and still approaching.

Freddy dashed to the passenger side, thinking to grab his gun out of the glovebox, but Lecter was on him in a flash. Freddy was half-turned when the leather sap thocked him over the ear. He got his hands up, but his knees were going and a needle jammed into his arm. He slid to the ground. Chest heaving, his last sight was the curl of Lecter's smile.

***

Ninety miles away, Will sat across from Clark Ingram in a Quantico interview room. Ingram was no longer smiling, having been informed that the dirt found in Sarah Craber's throat had been used to locate the bodies of fifteen other women, and that the same dirt had been found caked to the bottom of his boots.

Beverly would find Craber's hair at Ingram's house, and Zeller would find Ingram's footprints all over the crime scene, but the Science team didn't know that yet. Neither did Ingram. Only Will did.

He flipped through his clipboard, making notes. "Tell me, Mr. Ingram, what made you decide to become a social worker?"

***

Horrible bitter cold. Numb hands and feet. Numbness across his whole body.

Freddy's first instinct was to curl up to protect his torso, but he couldn't. A vise constricted his chest so tight he had trouble taking a full breath.

It took effort to open his gummy eyes. He could barely see. It was dark. Dead leaves rustled in the wind.

Low murmuring. Squinting, he made out two shadows several yards away, partially obscured by branches. They stood close to each other, like a couple of teens necking.

His throat was sticky. "Hello…?" he coughed. "Hello? Can you help me?"

One of the figures stilled. It moved toward him.

"Accident? Am I hurt bad?"

"No, Freddy. You'll be just fine." The voice was familiar.

"I'm so cold. Do you have a blanket?"

"I know you're cold. You only have to be cold for a bit longer."

The figure stepped into full view and a shaft of moonlight hit its face. It was Will Graham. He wore a warm smile, as if Freddy were an esteemed guest.

Fear shot through him, clearing his head. He wore only his shorts. He tried to lift his arms to no avail. The rasp of rope against his neck and ankles held him upright against a tree. Rope wrapped many times around his waist, and still more bound his hands behind the trunk.

His surroundings resolved into a dense, gloomy forest. The snow-covered floor was lit by a half moon and a smattering of stars, throwing sharp branches in high relief.

The other figure joined Graham in the open. Dr. Hannibal Lecter, looking similarly pleased, though less manic. He rested a genteel hand on Graham's lower back. Hannibal the Cannibal. The Chesapeake Ripper and his Apprentice. *And they were fucking fags.*

"Oh my dear God Jesus."

"Welcome to Green Ridge State Forest," Graham said, breath clouding the frigid air. "You didn't make it easy to catch you. Wasn't easy dragging you out here either."

Freddy tried to think. Strained to think. *Keep cool and think*. Cool and think.

He spoke several words before he could adjust the volume of his voice.

"If I die, there'll be an international manhunt against you. There's a warrant for your arrest now I'm sure. The only way you make it out alive is if you let me go."

Graham gave him a pitying look. "You've been missing for several days. They interviewed us, investigated us, and combed us over within an inch of our lives without finding a shred of evidence. We've already gotten away with your murder, Freddy."

Put the pain and fear away and think. Now. For all time. To have time. To have years. What did he have that they could want?

“Listen, then, man to man. I have a lot of money, and so does the Tattler. A half million. A million dollars if you release me. I can wire it to you anonymously once you escape the country.” The sentence shrill at the end.

“Man to man,” Graham said, as if testing the words. “Man to man. You use that expression to imply frankness, Freddy, I appreciate that. Would you say that you’re a good man?”

Oh brother. Graham already knew the answer to that damn question. “I live as well as I know how to live.”

“How benign. Like a woodland creature. A rabbit dumbly grazing the land, oblivious to the consequences of its actions.”

“*My actions*.” Freddy’s voice cracked. Snot dribbled down to his mouth. “Bloom, right? This is about Bloom. I pray to God for forgiveness for what I’ve done. I’ll change. I swear I can change.”

“Do you still think I’m the Chesapeake Ripper?” Graham seemed curious more than anything.

“Oh God.”

“A terrible thing, to have one’s identity taken from you,” Lecter said with a smile.

“Oh God no.”

“Do you know what the Ripper does?” Graham asked.

“Please no.”

“Please no, what?”

“Not me.”

“You don’t want us to cannibalize you?”

“No.”

“People who live as animals are not *real men*, Freddy, and it’s only cannibalism if you’re a man.”

“Oh no no no.” Freddy struggled against his bonds.

“Terminal restlessness,” Lecter noted. “As the body approaches death, it fills with adrenaline and feels compelled to go-go-go.”

Graham cocked his head. “Should we let him get up and go then?”

Let him go? “Yes! Yes!”

“He’s your victim, Will. Do what you think is best.”

The two of them shared an amused look. Freddy almost threw up watching.

He moaned when Graham drew his knife.

“Listen closely. I’m going to cut the ropes. You get a sixty second head start. After that, I’m coming.” He started with the binding at his ankles.

“A Wild Hunt,” Lecter said. “The ghostly spirits of the dead will rise to join our nightmarish ride. Perhaps your father will be among them, Mr. Lounds.”

His neck was freed, then his hands. Freddy tried to move them, but they were numb from the cold. Graham began hacking at the rope around his waist.

“The dead are particularly restless tonight,” he said. “I can feel them knocking at the door.”

“The veil between the living and the afterlife grows thin in midwinter. It wouldn’t be unreasonable for the door to open tonight.”

What the hell were they talking about? Some pagan bullshit?

Roughly: “If it does, will you help me close it?”

“Of course, Will.”

When the last rope was cut, Freddy flopped onto the snow. He rolled his eyes up at the twin chaos beasts staring down at him.

“Your time begins now,” Graham said. “I’d start hopping if I were you, little bunny.”

***

Freddy began the hunt with a fatal mistake. He ignored the clear trail of footprints leading back to the road and dashed in the opposite direction, leading him deeper into the vast forest.

Not that Will was complaining.

Tremors shot up and down his body. His muscles strained to give chase. He focused on the shadow between two oaks that had swallowed Lounds whole, holding himself back as the noises of his quarry faded in the distance.

Killing Lounds was different from the others. This was calculated. He was in his right mind, and he was doing it for himself. It threatened to subsume him.

The scarlet haze was rising.

Will stretched his jaw, resisting the urge to gnaw his tongue.

“My teeth have a mind of their own. Erupting from sore gums. Itchy.”

“You’re teething.”

“I tried to keep you separate, but the Dragon’s here, and Hobbs and Drumgo too now. Ingram and all the other ones I put away. All clamoring over Lounds.” Will shivered. “It’s frightening.”

“What you see and learn touches everything else in your mind. No effective barriers in the bone arena of your skull, even for the things you love.” Hannibal implicitly counted himself among the things Will loved, and that felt right. “These associations are inspirations, grotesque, but beautiful. Tools for you to use. You don’t have to be afraid of them.”

Will checked his watch. Twenty more seconds.

“I don’t want Lounds to die quick. I might need your help with that.”

“I’ll be right beside you.”

Black spines broke through the skin on his back like fledgling pin feathers. They grew and stretched and tangled with the forest underbrush. He rubbed his neck, shuddering to keep everything at bay.

“Stop me if I get out of hand. I think I… I think I’m going to eat his face.”

Hannibal was incandescent. “Just relax and have fun.”

Ha. Of course he’d say that. Will breathed in and out.

Five, four, three, two…

He was off like a shot. He forced himself to lope at a comfortable pace, not wanting to catch up too quickly. Hannibal was in even less of a hurry, leisurely picking his way around rocks and branches. The sound of his steps waned as Will left him behind.

Tracking Lounds was too easy. His footprints wended through thickets, over snow-covered hills and dales, scraping where he’d slipped, sometimes deep enough to kick up dirt. Will knew every inch of these woods, so his footing never faltered. The trail zigzagged around tip ups and blow downs, while he cut straight across.

White pines and oaks reached for him with pale fingers, stinging his face and hands. They cooed their whispered crackles and graced his hair with twigs and leaves. Their arms wrapped around his shoulders, urging him onward.

Lowing echoed ahead, calling out to nobody, “*Help! Help me!*”

The wails incensed Will to greater swiftness. Through grove and torrent, over jagged rocks, he flew, his feet maddened by the breath of Dionysus. As he ran, everything ran with him.

It wasn’t long before a pasty white figure came into view.

Lounds tripped and tumbled, already bleeding where the forest had sliced him. At the edge of White Oak Hollow, he hesitated and looked behind at Will. Nowhere to go. With a fearful stumble backward, he cast himself down into the ravine.

"*Fuck! Help!*"

At the bottom, Lounds scrambled to his feet only for icy hands to burst forth from the stream. They grabbed his ankles and yanked him down again with a splash. He struggled against the slick stones.

"*Stop! No! NO!*"

Seizing from the cold water, Lounds was too weak to prevent Will from kneeling on his back and handcuffing him. Heedless of his cries, Will dragged him, sobbing and screaming, by the cuffs to the far bank.

Will pulled out a syringe and flipped off the cap. "This will immobilize your body, but you'll feel everything. I'm going to remove your organs without anesthesia, Freddy."

He injected Lounds in the axillary vein near his armpit.

"Graham, please… please…" His voice garbled and trailed off as he lost control of his vocal muscles. A thousand spectral arms sprang from the earth to bind him against the roots of an old oak tree.

"There we go. We'll both find this more pleasant if you remain silent."

Holding a pen light in his mouth, Will positioned a scalpel blade below his bottom rib and cut. A twelve-inch incision drenched the snow in steaming blood—much more than when he'd done this on John.

"Uh oh. Might've hit something."

His fingers slipped inside the hot flesh. Reflection of the colon was more difficult with blood obscuring the white line of Toldt, but Will didn't let that stop him. Another burst of blood as he shifted it aside.

Will didn't have enough hands to retract everything, so he went in blind. Good thing he knew the feeling of the ureter and renal veins by touch. He followed the abdominal aorta down to the renal hilus and clamped it shut before severing it. More cuts to eliminate the fascia surrounding the kidney, not sparing the delicate adrenal gland.

He scooped the kidney out and plopped it in the snow.

"There. Should we grab the spleen and pancreas while we're here on the left side?"

Lounds managed to twitch his lips and mumble something faint.

Will leaned closer, one hand still sandwiched between Lounds's stomach and diaphragm, feeling the rattling of his breaths.

“What’s that? Sorry, I couldn’t make it out.”

Lounds made a few more attempts before Will caught the phrase.

“Fucking… faggot.”

Will pretended to consider. “You raise an excellent point, Freddy. Any other last words?”

“Cunt.”

Will smiled at him, a genuine smile. He placed his hand on Lounds’s heart and, leaning to him intimately as though to kiss him, he bit Lounds’s lips off, chewed them, and swallowed.

***

Hannibal soaked in the forest’s symphony. To him, the wind’s hush was as the swell of violins, cracking twigs as the plucking of a harp, and their quarry’s baying as the slow pull of a cello. He followed Will’s footsteps to Mahler’s *Adagietto*, *sehr langsam*, without haste.

Wet ripping sounds came from the hollow ahead. When Hannibal peeked over the ridge, a lovely sight arrested him:

Will, whole and gleaming, crouched over Lounds, cradling his head as he tore away strips of flesh. His teeth ground against teeth and exposed fascia where Lounds’s face once was.

The very earth awoke to this ecstasy. Sudden heavy heat melted snow. Leaves, ivy and oak and flowering bryony, crowned Will’s hair. Sweet milk came welling up where Will scratched the soil with bare fingers, and wherever chunks of gore landed, white mayapple, trillium, and bloodroot bloomed. All the mountain seemed taut with honeyed nectar, wild with divinity.

Will wrenched open what was left of Lounds’s jaw, sucked his tongue into his mouth, and bit it clean off.

These wonders drew Hannibal downhill. Will had removed Lounds’s kidney but hadn’t properly secured his vasculature before he’d been called to omophagia. With the amount of blood pouring from his side, Lounds would be dead within minutes.

“Will,” Hannibal called softly.

He paused at his work on Lounds’s nose to look up, chin drenched. Shining black in the moonlight, it dripped down his neck and darkened his white shirt. The high air hushed, and along the forest glen the leaves hung still.

“Do you still care if he dies quickly?”

As if waking from a dream, Will rubbed the bloom of soft sleep from his eyes and rose up, lightly and straight. His coat fell loose. Hannibal thrilled at the thought of Will dismembering him for his intrusion, but Will wasn’t interested in the rites of sparagmos. With blood-soaked hands he cupped Hannibal’s face.

Ground cartilage passed from Will's lips to his.

Hannibal wanted to honor his pledge to keep Lounds alive, he truly did, but when the raw flesh touched his tongue, the strings soared to a crescendo, and he too was overtaken by maenadic frenzy. All thoughts of their surroundings fled. There was only Will, the intensity of his scent, and the enlightenment of his touch.

With unnatural strength, Will shoved him against a tree and kissed him. Hannibal was giddy, clutching at branches and relying on Will to stay upright as they pawed at each other. On any other night, the bark may have dug uncomfortably into his back, but tonight it was as soft as a dryad's embrace.

Will sank to his knees and took him in his mouth. That alone was a revelation, but it became rapture when Will—merciful Will—applied his tongue and sucked. His burning gaze made Hannibal's knees weak. This was how it felt to be hungered after, wanted desperately as air, wanted *for himself* by someone who could not only survive the sight of his true form, but revel in it with him.

Swooning, Hannibal held Will's countenance whole and perfect in his mind, and pressed it to an image of himself, pressed them together until, from the red plasma core of their fusion, sparks flew upward, carrying their single image to the east, into the night sky to wheel with the stars above the sea.

***

Hippomenes led his fond bride to rest
Within the welcome darkness of the grotto;
They had their pleasure at full length…
At once a yellow mane flowed round their shoulders;
Their fingers changed to claws, their arms to legs.
Their breasts grew heavy; both wore tufted tails
That swept the floor, and when they talked they growled;
When they made love they sought deep-wooded places…

Epilogue: Primavera

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday, June 15th, 1984

Somewhere along il fiume Tevere in Italy…

"Wrap the leader around the tippet. Four, five, six times. Tuck the end between the lines. Tighten. Trim." Will used a small pair of scissors to trim the line. "It's called a blood knot."

Hannibal glanced up from his newspaper, today's *Corriere della Sera*. "A smooth and symmetrical connection that doesn't damage either line under tension. You favor it over the surgeon's knot?"

They sat on the riverside patio, Will preparing to wade out into the stream while Hannibal enjoyed his espresso in the fresh spring air.

"My blood knots are stronger than my surgeon's." Will rummaged through his tackle box for his new Daddy Long Legs. Hopefully the trout were biting for crane flies that morning. "You might pretend not to know something when I'm explaining it to you, by the way. It's so rare for me to know something you don't."

"Be reasonable. I have more than ten years on you, and I sleep half as much."

"Why on earth were you studying fishing knots?"

"I was curious after I saw the flies stuck in your cork stand. I'd never considered fly tying an art form before then."

Will smiled. These days, the thought of Hannibal sneaking into Chilton's basement evoked wry amusement and a touch of nostalgia.

"Are you sure you wouldn't be a good father?" Hannibal continued. "You could teach our son or daughter how to fish."

"You're the one who wants a child." Will's child, in particular. Hannibal was a little like Rumpelstiltskin that way. "But it wouldn't be fair to them, would it? Subjecting them to our lifestyle."

"Oh, *I* don't want a child. Not when I have you."

Now Hannibal was intentionally provoking him. Will had never succeeded in disabusing him of the misconception that Will was his creation. It was difficult to dispute when, besides catalyzing his self-acceptance, Will would likely be dead several times over if it weren't for him. Even now, Hannibal occasionally corrected his elocution as they conversed in Italian, like a scene straight out of *My Fair Lady*.

But Will had his pride.

“I’m not your child,” he admonished.

“But you could be.”

“Dear Lord, not this again.”

Since marriage wasn’t an option, Hannibal had been pestering him about adoption for the last month. Will’s objections—that it was too permanent and, honestly, too weird—had fallen on deaf ears.

Hannibal put on his most beseeching expression. “When I pass, all my assets will go toward conservation at the Uffizi Gallery. I shudder to think what will become of you.”

Will rolled his eyes. He was perfectly capable of supporting himself and had enough trouble keeping Hannibal’s money out of his bank account as it was. He could only imagine the rigamarole of secret offshore accounts and safe houses Hannibal’s lawyers would put him through should he ever die—which he wouldn’t for a long, long time. Will wouldn’t let him.

“You’re not even forty. *I’m* almost thirty. You’re not adopting me.” Fly secured to the line, Will began stepping into his waders.

“What if you end up trapped in a mental institution somewhere? Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis has a considerable rate of recurrence. I wouldn’t have the authority to retrieve you.”

Exploiting Will’s nosocomephobia was a cheap shot.

“If you didn’t smell my fever before my first hallucination, then you’d kidnap me from the hospital. I’m not fooled by this handwringing. You just want some form of legal control over me.”

“And *you* are only objecting due to your Victorian sensibilities,” Hannibal complained. “Is this about me calling you a good boy when we make love?”

Will flushed, several choice memories coming to mind.

“I’d rather not psychoanalyze our sex life, if it’s all the same to you.”

He was saved from the conversation when Peter stepped out from behind a coppice of pine trees on the riverbank, holding a rod and wearing his own pair of waders.

“The fish are hungry today! Already caught me a few greylings. You coming or not?”

Hannibal offered him an espresso. “Please, Peter, help convince Will to formalize our relationship.”

“Still on about that?” He squinted at Hannibal. “Why d’you care so much about something legally binding when you spend so much time breaking the law?”

Hannibal gave the question serious consideration. “Few desires are born of reason. I’m obviously still struggling with the fear of abandonment.”

“Wouldn’t you rather get over it than bother Will?”

“Hey, that’s enough,” Will said. “He’s not bothering me.”

The imagi raised their eyebrows at each other in amusement—the look they shared whenever Will acted like they were real.

“So when are you two coming back here?” Peter asked pleasantly. “It’s only been a few weeks and Will’s already dreaming about the Tevere. Best fishing he’s had in a while.”

Hannibal smiled. “We could return sometime in the winter. What do you think, Will?”

Beverly Katz poked her head out of the pine shrubs, holding a negroni.

“Hey! Earth to Will!”

With a sharp inhale, Will returned to his backyard in Wolf Trap, Virginia, which was currently bustling with a nauseating mix of academics, doctors, Baltimore socialites, and Bureau employees.

Hannibal was throwing a housewarming party. Moving closer to DC made sense now that Hannibal had begun a psychiatric residency there and Will was regularly commuting to FBI Headquarters. With a stretch of river and wide-open fields, the renovated farmstead was perfect for Will. He’d been worried that Hannibal would miss city life at first, then felt foolish when he remembered Hannibal’s fondness for homemaking and being wherever Will was.

Most of the guests crowded around the rustic outdoor kitchen where Hannibal entertained them with the poetry of his cuisine. He was plating *filets de cailles aux pommes d’or* —"pommes d’or” being oranges and tangerines, not literal golden apples. As much as Hannibal liked his wordplay (*pomum aurantium*, *pomodoro*, etc.), even he wasn’t bold enough to serve Hesperidian fruit to Jack Crawford, though he’d thought about it, no doubt.

Still not fully present, Will blinked up at Beverly. “Hey.”

They sat at the edge of the yard near the flower beds. Sunflower, iris, and lily were in various stages of vegetative growth. Will had planted them last month, thinking Hannibal might use them for his table arrangements.

Winston, the stray who Will had found wandering their street last week, was hiding among the sunflower stalks, leery of the crowd. When he began digging, Will whistled, and he padded up to lean shamefacedly against his leg. Will rubbed under his collar.

Beverly offered a hand for Winston to sniff, but he was too nervous to approach her. It was nice having someone on the same social wavelength around.

“Congrats on the house,” she said. “But why are you hiding by the bushes when you’re the host?”

“It’s Hannibal’s house and Hannibal’s party. I’m as much a guest as you are.”

“Don’t you live here?”

“Well.” He gestured at the civilians chortling over watermelon and prosciutto roses. “*They* don’t know that.”

The crowd of sun hats and cocktail dresses surrounding Hannibal parted for a moment, and they happened to catch each other’s eye. Hannibal waved at him with his piping bag of granité, wearing a besotted smile.

Beverly snorted. “You sure about that?”

Despite Will’s druthers, their relationship was an open secret among the FBI. He was partly to blame for telling Crawford and Beverly, but the rest had found out after they’d discovered some conclusive evidence in Hannibal’s bedroom during their investigation of Lounds’s disappearance. How, out of all their secrets, they hadn’t managed to hide *this*, Will would never understand. Part of him wondered if Hannibal had done it on purpose.

He’d expected Crawford to terminate his contract, but the ax never fell. Evidently, he cared more about saving lives than his top profiler’s personal proclivities, no matter what the rest of the team thought.

“I’m surprised you came when you’ve so many bodies on the slab,” he said.

“We finished the autopsies. They’re being shipped to various funeral homes as we speak.” She sighed. “It’s silly Jack didn’t have you look at them.”

“I’m too friendly with the Ripper for his taste.”

“That’s exactly why you should be on the case. He might’ve left you a message we wouldn’t understand.”

Will shrugged. “It’s for the best. If the Ripper knew I was looking, it’d only inspire him to grander displays.” Hannibal loved surprising him.

He spotted Chilton chatting with Crawford by the roasted pig’s head. Risen like Lazarus, his face was mostly healed, and his reputation was fully intact now that the Ripper was active again. He eyed the hors d'oeuvres with suspicion. To be fair, Will would also be skipping the pigeon claws for the carpaccio—he’d recently developed a taste for raw meat.

When their eyes met, he winked. Chilton looked away, ruffled.

“That’s not why Jack’s keeping you away,” Beverly said.

“I know.” Will took a swig of his beer.

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“Jack’s just being thorough. Can’t blame him.” Raucous laughter broke out among a nearby group and Winston whined nervously. Will scratched his head in reassurance. “Isn’t that right, Winson? He’s just doing his job.”

Crawford was being more than “just thorough.” Without an alibi for the day of Lounds’s disappearance, scrutiny had shifted to Hannibal. They’d finally put it together that he was a perfect fit for the Ripper’s profile. Will could pick out members of the investigation based on who was avoiding the meat. Beverly, he noted, hadn’t touched any food all evening.

They seemed to be fifty-fifty on whether Will was an accomplice. Again, he’d expected to be fired, but Crawford kept on calling him. They must have some plan, realizing after Chilton had been so thoroughly framed that the only way to land the Ripper was to catch him in the act. Even this little tête-à-tête with Beverly was probably part of their long con, but that didn’t bother Will. Even if her friendship was an act, he enjoyed their conversations. Mostly, he was curious to see how it would all end.

Crawford mosied over to join them. He seemed in high spirits, still boisterously laughing as he waved goodbye to Price and Zeller. Winston shrank behind Will’s chair at his approach.

“Glad you could make it, Jack.”

“Glad to be here! I haven’t seen this many BSU employees at a party since ‘75. Shame our newest profiler couldn’t come.”

Fresh meat at Behavioral Science? Was Crawford planning to replace him?

“Have I heard of them?”

“Dr. Alana Bloom. She just started teaching at the Academy. Your paths might’ve crossed in Chicago.”

For the first time since killing Lounds, Will felt a flicker of fear.

“We know each other,” he said with carefully composed neutrality. “She’s good at what she does.”

Crawford and Beverly both studied him.

Will swirled the beer around in his glass.

“I’m afraid I can’t stay,” Crawford said. “But I’d like to take some food to go.”

Will waved over one of the servers. “Sure thing. I’ll have one of the staff bring you something from the kitchen.”

Crawford used a napkin to pick up a piece of roulade. “No, this is good. Just bring me a container and I’ll serve myself from here. With your permission, of course, Will.”

Over Crawford's shoulder, Will noticed Hannibal watching their exchange.

"Do I have your permission to do that, Will?"

"Help yourself," Will said as the server returned with Tupperware. "Eat it before it goes bad. That's about a hundred dollars' worth of wagyu beef."

Under such heavy suspicion, Hannibal had gotten creative with his menu. Crawford wouldn't find anything incriminating in the food. They needn't worry unless he asked to sample the beverages.

Will downed the last of his beer: golden ale brewed in an oak wine barrel. It was good, but he was really looking forward to the single malt whiskey that wouldn't finish aging for a few more years at least. His own private reserve. Freddy Lounds would be a part of his life for a long time to come—and Beverly's life as well, if her negroni had vermouth in it.

Later, when all the guests had left, Winston had had his bath, and it was just the two of them lying in bed, Will held Hannibal's left hand. He ran his thumbs over his knuckles. *Four, five, six.*

"We should make that trip to Brazil to get your extra finger removed."

Hannibal cracked open an eye. "I thought you liked it."

"I do, but they're going to start bending the law soon. Someone's going to break in to search our fridge without a warrant."

"That never concerned you before."

Will grimaced. "They have Alana working the Ripper case."

It was only a matter of time before Will would be forced to choose between her freedom and theirs. He dreaded the day he'd find her snooping around their cellar. Best to leave before it came to that.

"Hm." Hannibal turned his hand over to hold Will's. "I don't indulge much in regret, but there are times I wish we'd worked harder to blind her."

We? Will had worked very hard to blind her, thank you very much. But this was the closest thing to an apology Hannibal had ever given him, so he bit his tongue.

"A few more months of fun while your hand heals. Then we slip away."

"Without so much as a goodbye?" Hannibal had that devious gleam in his eye. "Don't you think we owe Agent Crawford the truth?"

"Give him what he wants?" Will imagined it. A last supper before they started their new life.

"Give him the Chesapeake Ripper," Hannibal purred. "Let him see my apprentice with clear eyes."

“Wouldn’t you rather taunt him from abroad?”

“His fate was sealed when he orchestrated your interview with the Tattler.” Hannibal stretched out over the sheets, spreading his thighs in invitation. “*The Ripper’s oral fixation with the masculine body culminates in his impulse to eat their organs.* I haven’t forgotten.”

Will felt where Hannibal was still loose from that morning. His cock twitched.

“I’m quite proud of that bit of psychobabble. It wasn’t entirely wrong.”

“You think I want to hand-feed you Crawford tartare because I was weaned too early as an infant?”

In retrospect, Will believed that Hannibal’s consumption of Dacre was indeed an expression of sublimated sexual desire, but some things were better left unsaid.

“I think your pleasure centers are focused largely in your mouth.” Will bent to kiss him, long and slow. As though it had a mind of its own, Hannibal’s tongue snaked against his, tasting toothpaste and mouthwash. “And your ears,” Will breathed against his temple. “And your nose.”

Hannibal liked clean smells. Will straight from the bath. The fresh sweat from his armpits and the salt of his semen. Sapone di mandorle from the Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella. For him half the pleasure of sex was written in the air, painted with scents and sounds as vivid as colors. Will had learned to layer and feather them as if painting wet on wet.

He stuck his fingers in Hannibal’s mouth. “Suck.”

His eyes slipped closed as he did as commanded. Will licked around his ear and stroked the back of his neck until his fingers were sopping wet and saliva dripped down Hannibal’s chin. When Will pulled them away, Hannibal bit down, trying to keep them in.

Will kissed his neck. “Let go.”

Hannibal didn’t require much stretching, but Will took his time anyway to watch him squirm. For Will half the pleasure of sex came from mirroring Hannibal’s, so he’d become finely attuned to his every want, attaining a more nuanced understanding each time they converged. He’d come a long way since their days of crude sadomasochistic transference. Pain was merely one of many colors in his pallet now, and he didn’t have to be afraid if he heard the Red Dragon’s growls. He was free, a fully present participant.

“Will,” Hannibal admonished. His arms and legs were spread imperiously, one hand lazily tugging Will’s hair. *What are you waiting for?*

Will nipped his mouth in apology and rolled on top.

Hannibal moaned in faint surprise as he entered him. *You’re so hard for me, even though you’ve come twice today already.* Hannibal himself was softer than usual. He’d need extra service tonight, which Will was more than happy to provide.

He started slow, kissing him deeply, thumbs rubbing behind his ears. Their chests pressed tight together, becoming damp with sweat, sensitized in the cool spring air. Will didn't suppress his breathy little whines, letting Hannibal hear how hard it was to control himself.

When Will shifted back to increase the pace of his thrusts, Hannibal's face contorted as if in pain. He gripped the sheets, panting, lips desperate for stimulation. Will pressed his hand over his mouth and nose. Hannibal nuzzled against it as though it were Will himself in entire. The pink tip of his tongue found its way out of his face, tasting, cupping the round of his palm, running between his fingers. Then he inhaled, his tongue back where it lived, and his closed mouth moved as if he savored wine.

Hannibal didn't need his cock touched when Will fucked him with all five senses. Will dipped in and out of eye contact, monitoring his reactions while trying not to come himself. He shifted the angle in accordance with his microexpressions. Hannibal's eyelids fluttered, debauched.

Such a good boy.

Biting Will's wrist hard enough to draw blood, he came.

Will wasn't sure if Hannibal said it aloud or not. It didn't matter when it was written clearly across his face. Will fell into the wide dark pools of Hannibal's pupils. He could see every blood vessel twisting across his retinas. Every spasm of sated approval. *His good little boy, fucking him so good, such a good boy for him.*

It shot through him like amphetamine. Will came with a moan, luxuriating in their doubled orgasm.

Afterwards, they scrubbed each other sparkling clean in the bathtub.

Hannibal massaged ointment into the two-inch scar on Will's cheek, which had healed pale and flat under his impeccable care. Through his beard, it would be noticeable only when he was tanned in the summer. A razor-sharp line sat pink and pretty on his thigh, raised just enough that Hannibal could run his fingertips over it in the dark. The bite mark on his neck had long since faded and been replaced many times over with new ones. A thick ring of tooth marks circled his heart.

Will's scars had washed away, but Hannibal would soon bear his own. Will lifted his left hand and kissed his middle fingers, loath to say goodbye to either.

The Calydonian boar tread softly through the fields, untroubled by any hunting party. The unslain Draco stood high in the clear night above the old farmhouse, and the room where a dog lay curled in his bed between a broken boat engine and a harpsichord. The same stars would observe this scene whether it took place in France, Italy, or Brazil. Wherever they found themselves, there would be the lap of ocean waves, doors flung wide open, and the smell of springtime all year round.

Chapter End Notes

Acknowledgements:

I owe a huge debt to wanderlust96. This story only exists because I said to myself, “Man, I wish I could read all their work for the first time again.” The idea of “Will is rude so Hannibal plans to kill him” comes from *Unit 304*. The kidnapping section was heavily inspired by *Opia*. I paraphrased some lines from *Opia*, including “are they like you then,” “a mental patient at a high-end retreat,” “I’ve seen worse from fellow residents,” and probably more that I’m forgetting. I didn’t set out on this project intending to post it anywhere, and I think it acquired its own identity over time, but yeah, go read wanderlust96’s work.

Besides extensive quotes from Thomas Harris and *The Metamorphoses*, I took lines from *De figuris Veneris*, *1984*, *The Awakening*, Mary Oliver’s *Fall Song*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *The Bacchae*. And the Bible. Do I have to credit the Bible?

If you made it all the way to the end, thank you! This story absolutely consumed five months of my life. I’m happy if it brought anyone a little joy. <3

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